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H-BOMB OVER AMERICA

JEFF SUTTON

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JEFF SUTTON's background includes journalism, technical writing (specializing in flight safety), human engineering and communications in the aviation and missile industry. He has written many novels for Ace Books, including BOMBS IN ORBIT (D-377 — 35¢). He lives with his wife and children in La Mesa, California.

Of today's technology race, he has written:

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**H = BOMB
OVER
AMERICA**

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H-BOMB OVER AMERICA

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ONE

Time: 3:15 P.M., 7 July 1973.

Place: Russian ICBM base, Novaya Zemlya.

COMRADE IGOR CHERNYCHEV had decided to scrap the bomb!

General Fyodor Borisov suppressed his sudden elation and quickly reread the message. Yes, it was definite: the bomb was to be dismantled. Unbelievable but true! Following, as it did, the electrifying news that Chairman Chernychev and the President of the United States had agreed to a soon-due summit meeting to discuss peace meant that Chernychev had secured his power in the Kremlin. Borisov sensed a surge of relief. So, Marshal Trofimuk had lost out. . . . Now, perhaps, the world could breathe again.

Borisov became aware that his orderly still was waiting and looked up. "That will be all," he said curtly.

"Yes, comrade General." The orderly wheeled and left, his footsteps echoing hollowly in the underground corridor beyond the General's office.

Borisov stared bemusedly toward the ceiling. "*Natalya, I'll be coming home,*" he murmured. He allowed the nostalgic thoughts to gather. *Moscow in the fall, when the leaves are turning . . .* Then he'd live again. God, how he hated this bleak, desolate Arctic land—hated the flat-faced soldiers with their blank, slanted eyes, hated Loshkin. Especially Loshkin.

Sighing, he returned his attention to the matter at hand. While the bomb existed, the world unknowingly trembled on the verge of oblivion. Even knowledge of such a weapon by the West could precipitate a nuclear holocaust which no nation could escape. The bomb had been the Earth's sword of Damocles; that had been the nightmare. But now it was dead, or soon would be. For too many years—since the dark days of Stalin, he reflected—peace had been an illusion; perhaps now it could become a reality. It scarcely seemed possible.

Promptly at 4:00 P.M., Borisov put on his greatcoat and rode the elevator to the upper level to conduct the weekly test—"The last one," he promised himself—of the rocket launcher designed to hurl the bomb atop it into orbit.

He contemplated the bomb's birth as the steel cage whirled upward. Serge Anfilov had created the weapon to destroy America. Anfilov had been mad! Following his sudden death—some whispered by assassination—Igor Chernychev had seized the reins from the grasping hands of Marshal Trofimuk. But his hold had been tenuous. Now, finally, the bitter struggle had been resolved. Thank God Chernychev and not Trofimuk had won, for Igor Chernychev was an intellectual and a man of peace.

When the elevator jolted to a halt, the steel door confronting him slid open. A sentry in the small chamber beyond snapped to attention, his flat, Mongolian features inscrutable in the glare of the yellow wall lamp.

Borisov crossed the concrete floor, heedless of the dark eyes that followed him. Ascending a narrow flight of stairs, he wondered how Colonel Loshkin, his chief of staff, would react when he learned the bomb was to be scrapped. Loshkin had been Anfilov's man. Appointed to command the bleak Arctic base, he'd supervised the bomb's secret installation. His mind, too, was twisted with hate. Chernychev's first act on seizing power was to transfer the command to Borisov. Loshkin hadn't relished that.

A second steel door opened and Borisov stepped outside, blinking in the glare of pale sunlight on the snowfields. A patchwork of fleecy clouds straddled the sky and the wind nipped his face. He shivered and drew his greatcoat closer

about him, seeing the gaunt figure of Colonel Tamfil Loshkin silhouetted against the whiteness. Beyond, the land fell away to the ice-bound Barents Sea. Bleak, windswept, endless in its monotony . . .

As Borisov started forward, his feet crunched in the snow, the brittle sound of snapping twigs. Loshkin turned abruptly and faced him. Tall and taciturn, he was of the same Mongolian ancestry as the sentry in the lower chamber.

"The test is ready to begin, comrade General," he said.

"I wasn't informed of the sky reports," Borisov snapped. He felt a sudden ire. He neither liked the shortcuts his chief of staff presumed to take, nor did he like the man himself. Regarding soldiers from the eastern provinces as little more than barbarians, he did not except his chief of staff. When he considered it, he realized most of Loshkin's men came from the East. He'd meant to comment on that in his official reports, yet somehow never had.

"An American spy satellite passed overhead at fourteen hours and an American manned vehicle at fourteen-forty hours," Loshkin replied imperturbably. "Would the comrade General like to review the tracking records?"

"That won't be necessary," he replied stiffly. "You may proceed with the tests."

"Yes, comrade General." Loshkin had a way of speaking that but thinly veiled his insolence. Murmuring into a wrist mike, he turned away. Borisov waited impatiently, conscious of the cold and rising wind. The test was a farce, a game that had been played to soothe the angry voices of Marshal Trofimuk and his neo-Stalinist backers while Chernychev grasped for sufficient power to scrap the missile. Now that time had come. Trofimuk would join Anfilov in an unmarked grave, he concluded dispassionately. And Loshkin? He smiled grimly. The future held no place for Loshkin; the world would be better without him.

He cast his eyes around. Split by the strait of Matochkin Shar, Novaya Zemlya formed a six hundred mile long crescent that separated the Barents Sea in the west from the Kara Sea in the east. Directly ahead, a rocky peninsula jutted northward toward the perpetually-frozen Franz Josef Land and the icy wilderness beyond. He grudgingly acknow-

ledged the island's military utility: straight north, across the pole, lay the soft underbelly of America.

Borisov scanned the rugged coastline with a professional eye. Barren of all but tundra, it showed little of the hand of man. Here and there an antenna or saucer jutted skyward, but nothing else to indicate the score of missile silos hidden beneath the snow. Nothing whatever to suggest an orbital bomb. He marveled that foxes, lemmings, bear and reindeer managed to survive and even flourish in such a god-forsaken land. At times, millions of screeching guillemots, ducks, swans and wild geese filled the sky. Natalya would love the sight of the swans, he thought wistfully.

His brow furrowed. *Men dream and the world races heedlessly on*—the words came from some forgotten source. Had Chernychev's dream of peace propelled him to move too fast? Had he really secured his power base? His agreement with the American President and his decision to scrap the bomb so indicated; but what had become of Trofimuk? The question perturbed him.

The earth trembled underfoot, disrupting his thoughts.

"Beginning missile erection," Loshkin announced. He didn't answer. A low rumble assailed his ears. Ahead, the white expanse abruptly broke as a huge steel silo door beneath the snow rolled to one side, exposing a gaping, circular hole. A shaft of warm air rose.

Slowly, majestically, a silver cone thrust upward, rising higher and higher as powerful hydraulic jacks raised the platform under it. Metallic voices of loudspeakers echoed off the silo walls in ghostly, hollow sounds. A ring of monstrous rocket engines came slowly into view and the platform halted.

The rumble came again as giant steel crossbeams jutted out from the walls, locking horizontally beneath the platform. Circular doors opened beneath the flame nozzles and huge tubes swung into place. During an actual firing, they would funnel away the raging exhaust gases.

As the rumble died, Loshkin said, "Five minutes, ten seconds to lift state."

"Very good," Borisov agreed grudgingly. "You may proceed with firing readiness."

"Yes, comrade General." Loshkin spoke into his wrist mike and metallic voices boomed up from the depths. Borisov's eyes lingered on the missile while its electrical, electronic, pneumatic and hydraulic systems were checked. Although he'd witnessed a number of such tests, he'd never lost his awe at the sight. The booster was a modernized version of that used to push manned satellites into orbit. At its nose, well over a hundred feet in the air, was the death-dealing bomb-carrier itself.

Borisov suspected that much of his awe stemmed from knowledge of the missile's potential—its capability of destroying all life within a two-hundred mile radius of its impact point. Boosted into polar orbit, its payload—a nuclear cobalt bomb—could be brought down on any spot on earth. The knowledge clouded his conscience. He shuddered at the possibility.

Loshkin swung toward him, his face strangely set. "All firing circuits are checked and the missile is launch-ready," he reported.

"The time?"

"Eleven minutes and forty seconds."

"Very good." Borisov frowned at the missile. "You may secure."

"Secure?"

"The missile, Colonel."

"Ah, the missile." Loshkin riveted his gaze at the great steel weapon jutting like a gigantic spear into the sky. High above it, the clouds scudded past like tiny sailboats.

"Well?" Borisov rapped impatiently.

"With it we shall own the world," Loshkin answered softly.

Borisov's head jerked up sharply. "What was that?"

"The missile is the key."

"What foolishness is that?" he demanded.

"No foolishness, comrade General."

"That is for others to decide," he reprimanded.

"The decision has been made, comrade General."

"Decision? Do you know what you're saying?"

"Do you believe such a weapon was built to be dismantled?" Loshkin countered. He saw the other's startled

look and continued, "A secret is like a river of quicksilver, General. It seeps everywhere. It has but hastened the day."

Borisov drew himself up stiffly. "This conversation will be reported."

"Ah, yes."

"Order the missile secured," he commanded.

"No, comrade General."

"No? How dare you?"

"The missile will be fired," Loshkin declared.

Something in the other's voice alerted Borisov and he felt a quick stab of terror. Loshkin's face was set, implacable, and Borisov fancied that his eyes had turned to small, black stones. My God, the man was mad! He forced himself to calmness and ordered, "Report to your quarters, Colonel."

"Then who would fire the missile?"

"Report to your quarters," Borisov thundered. "Consider yourself under arrest."

"Look behind you, comrade General."

Borisov turned, feeling his fright swirl anew. The sentry he'd passed in the lower chamber stood a dozen feet away, his rifle held loosely. His black eyes were tight and alert. Borisov fought to quell the tumult within him as he looked back at his chief of staff. "What is the meaning of this?" he demanded.

"It is necessary, General, unless you would care to order the missile fired."

"You're mad!"

"I am?"

"You'd destroy the world," Borisov gasped. He stared at his chief of staff, numb with the knowledge of what was happening. One part of his mind accepted it; the other rejected it.

"Perhaps and perhaps not," Loshkin observed.

"Trofimuk?" exclaimed Borisov hoarsely. "Is this his work?"

"Trofimuk is a fool!"

"Chernychev?" he asked in a shocked whisper. Not Chernychev! Violently he rejected the thought.

"That you'll never know, comrade General."

"You're a fool!" Borisov exploded.

"Perhaps."

"Do you want to wipe out the human race?"

"Not all of it." Loshkin shook his head.

Borisov forced himself to steadiness. "Do you believe there would be no reprisal?"

"Reprisal, yes."

"In God's name, why?"

"God is a paper tiger, comrade General. Men create their own destiny."

"Create it? You'll destroy the world," he exclaimed in a hushed whisper.

"No," Loshkin denied simply. He raised his voice to the sentry: "Carry out your orders."

"No!" Borisov uttered the desperate cry, swinging around at the same instant he heard the flat bark of a weapon. Something thumped against his chest and he sagged slowly forward; the snow came up to meet him. *Natalya . . .* Her face flashed in his mind, limned against a background of great mushroom clouds. *Moscow. Ah, Moscow . . .* The grayness came.

The conspiracy had begun.

TWO

Time: 1310 hours (GMT), 7 July 1973.

Place: In Polar orbit.

THE DART-WINGED astroplane hurtled through orbital space high above the Arctic wastes. Off to one side hung the moon, huge and misshapen in its waxing phase. With the Earth's axis seasonally tilted, the sun overshot the pole, giving the ice fields below a curious off-white appearance.

The two occupants in the dart-winged plane were scarcely aware of the massive planet beneath; their attention was riveted on a glittering object that tumbled slowly through the sky far ahead, at a somewhat lower altitude. The glitter came from sunlight on metal. The man occupying the pilot's seat was of middle height, lean, with calm brown eyes. His companion was dark and wiry. Garbed in the heavy suits of space, they appeared like twins. The silence in the

instrument-laden cockpit was broken only by the faint whir of automatic cameras which the pilot had turned on at the instant the object was sighted.

The pilot broke the silence first. "A booster," he said. His name was Walker—Major Jed Walker, USAF—and he was one of several astronaut command pilots assigned to the new Earth-to-orbit-and-return astroplane, the most recent weapon in the Air Force arsenal. And the most secret. "She's a big baby, like the kind they use to boost the *Voskhods*," he finished.

"Big and ugly," the copilot agreed. His name was Henry Vollmer but the Henry long since had given way to "Hank." "Tapes on?"

"Roger." Vollmer fiddled with the radarscope. "We should be able to pick up her payload."

"Sweep the sky, every inch of it," Walker commanded. The booster began sliding from view as the astroplane's needle nose swung slowly in yaw. He fired a small jet to bring it back into line of flight, then stabilized the vehicle's attitude with other jets. Scrutinizing the booster intently, he realized it was on the downward leg of its trajectory. "She's going to be gone in a moment," he murmured.

"The cameras might show her up better," Vollmer suggested.

Walker calculated rapidly. The astroplane—designated as the XMSV-1—had raced poleward above the Aral Sea and along the Urals to cross the coast west of the Yamal Peninsula that stretched into the Kara Sea. Novaya Zemlya, the Red ICBM base, had wheeled to their rear. The booster had to have been launched from there. *Why from an ICBM base?* The question perturbed him.

"Got the payload," Vollmer exclaimed. He adjusted a dial and the blip that had appeared on the scope grew brighter. "I read her at fifty-two thousand yards."

"Slant range?"

"She's somewhat below us." He read off the figures.

"Tape everything, Hank."

Vollmer twisted his head. His features appeared small and pinched behind the massive faceplate. "Think they might be reading us?"

"I don't believe she's manned."

"Why not?" demanded Vollmer. "That booster's plenty big."

"She came up from Novaya Zemlya."

"So?"

"They don't launch manned jobs from there."

"I wouldn't bet on it," Vollmer shot back cynically.

"You could be right, Hank." Walker moved his eyes from the blip and fastened them on the booster. It was small now and far away, mainly discernible from the sunglint on its metal skin. He watched it tumble toward the distant snowfields. "Get Beach Boy on the phones," he instructed.

Vollmer flipped a switch. "Zebra to Beach Boy," he called. A crackling came through the phones and when it died he repeated the message.

"Beach Boy . . . read you faintly, Hank." The voice, relayed through the polar satellite communication network, was that of Major Sam Kirby, USAF astronaut command pilot who'd first tested the XMSV-1. Kirby was monitoring the present flight from the communication center at Vandenberg Air Force Base, on the Central California Coast. His words were torn with static. "How me?"

"Faint and noisy, Sam. We're sliding over the pole with a bogey on the scope."

"Where'd you pick it up?" asked Kirby quickly.

"Around 84 North. We spotted the booster."

"From Novaya Zemlya?"

"Probably."

Kirby's voice rose. "Just one? Have you swept the sky?"

"She's a loner, Sam."

"She on the cameras?"

"Shot the works," Vollmer assented.

"Any details?" asked Kirby insistently.

"The booster was big—like the Voskhod power plants."

"How about the payload?"

"I read her at fifty-two thousand yards."

Jed Walker cut into the phones. "Sky Sweep should have her by now, Sam." Sky Sweep, a new space surveillance system, was based on a series of polar satellites that swept space with their radar scans at programmed times.

"Hold it," Kirby returned. The radio sputtered for a long moment while the XMSV-1 raced over the top of the world. His voice came back suddenly. "I've alerted Lampert."

"Good idea," Walker acknowledged. General Joe Lampert's command included the flight test operations of the new Air Force Space Wing, of which the dart-winged astroplane was the first flight vehicle. Plainly, Sam Kirby was perturbed. Feeling the disquiet nibble at the edge of his own mind, Walker didn't blame him.

He reached toward a small computer that could make seventy thousand computations per second. Flexing his fingers in the heavy gloves, he scanned the console and punched several keys; the answer appeared instantly on a readout panel. He eyed the figures, then reached a decision. "We're going to take a closer look at that baby, Sam."

"Rendezvous? You're on the go-down leg," warned Kirby.

"The computer says we have time."

"Lampert's en route here now, Jed."

"Can't wait."

"Okay," Kirby assented reluctantly, "She's your baby."

"No sweat, Sam."

"Tapes on?"

"Tapes on," Walker acknowledged. He glanced at the radarscope, eyed the readout meters and punched several buttons on the computer. As the answers appeared in the readout windows, he pressed a firing key. Small, forward-pointing retrorockets flamed briefly and he felt the tug of the force on his body. "Commencing transfer ellipse," he reported.

"Good hunting, Jed."

"A piece of cake." Its forward velocity slowed, the astroplane began to fall from orbit. Vollmer periodically called out slant range and altitude as the blip climbed higher on the scope. Recorded on tape, the information automatically was radioed to ground stations.

Walker felt the moments drag—long, quiet moments during which the dart-winged plane fell lower and lower while hurtling southward above the ice fields far below. In the several moments since first sighting the booster, they'd raced over the top of the world, now were rushing down

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above the Western Hemisphere. Their poleward path had been above 60 East; now, due to the Earth's rotation, their present position was slightly west of the 121st meridian, above 83 North. Ahead lay Prince Patrick and the Banks Islands, the Great Bear Lake of Northern Canada, the West Coast of the United States.

Seattle—within minutes it would be wheeling past beneath him, the city of his birth and boyhood. He'd always intended to return, he mused, yet never had following graduation from the Air Force Academy. It would be dawn down there—light in the east, dark in the west—just opposite to what it had been while hurtling poleward toward Novaya Zemlya. Vandenberg, where Sam Kirby manned the phones, was caught in the half-light as day pushed night into the west.

He briefly wondered what had become of Helen Day, the old gang. . . . They'd scattered like leaves in the wind. Now he was rushing down from the pole. The years had been long, yet short; all had been filled with excitement and satisfaction; he was doing what he liked best.

Walker contemplated the thought reflectively. In his youth, men had been restricted to the thin envelope of air. Now men—both American and Russian—routinely circled the Earth in both military and scientific space stations; other men were on the moon, and communication and weather satellites made their appointed rounds in both equatorial and polar orbits. But the XMSV-1 was the first of its kind, a new breed of bird that freed man from the launch pad. What would it be like ten years hence?

"I've lost the payload on the scope," Vollmer reported.

"We'll pick her up." He checked the plane's attitude in pitch, roll and yaw and riveted his eyes on the clock. At the precise instant spelled out by the computer, he punched another firing key and the powerful twin hydrogen engines flamed to life, slamming him against the back of the seat. The dart-winged plane leaped forward and began spiraling outward on an intercept course with the strange satellite.

"Rough," Vollmer grunted in the phones.

"What did you expect?" Walker grinned. The XMSV-1 was a bomb, all right. Before long, larger versions would be

shuttling Air Force crews back and forth between Earth and the manned orbiting space stations with the regularity of clockwork. A milk run, he thought. But at the moment, the vehicle was the only one of its kind. He drew a tremendous satisfaction from the feel of its power.

Returning his eyes to the clock, he watched the sweeping second hand. Again, at a precise instant, he punched a key and the g force tugging at his body ceased as the powerful engines shut down; the XMSV-1 coasted in eerie silence through the vastness of space.

"Got her again," Vollmer exclaimed.

"Good navigation, Hank."

"Yeah, on the part of the computer." As the copilot adjusted a dial, the blip grew brighter on the scope. "We're coming up to see you, baby."

The radio crackled and Kirby's voice came in the phones: "Beach Boy to Zebra . . ."

"Zebra . . . we're at engine cut-off," Walker reported.

"Got the package on the scope?"

"Hank has her now. We should be picking her up visually."

Kirby cautioned, "If she's manned, we don't want her to get the details of that bucket you're flying."

"I don't believe she is, Sam."

"Because she came up from Novaya? I wouldn't bank on that."

"That's what I told him," Vollmer interjected.

"Shut up; you're just the hired help," Walker retorted. His voice sobered as he answered Kirby, "I've considered that but it's extremely unlikely."

"She might have automatic cameras and some kind of film retrieval or television system," Kirby warned.

"Yeah," Walker mused. There was a good chance Sam was right. The satellite might have just such equipment. If so, was it coincidence that it was launched into an orbit almost identical with their own, and at a time that would place it in the dart-winged plane's proximity? It wasn't probable. He voiced the thought.

"I can't imagine their information is that good," Kirby conjectured.

"No?" drawled Vollmer.

"I don't believe so."

"Neither do I," Walker concluded, "but I believe it's imperative that we look at that baby—see the cut of her jib."

"Give us a running description," Kirby instructed. "Lampert will be chewing nails."

"Roger." Walker glanced at the radarscope while pondering the conversation. Sam was right; it didn't seem possible that Russia could know so much about the XMSV-1—not down to the precise details of their flight schedule. Yet the coincidence of the two vehicles occupying nearly the same space-time corridor seemed equally far-fetched. More important, what was the nature of the beast? The launch from an ICBM base was all the stranger in light of the White House announcement of a new summit meeting in the near future. Peace!—it swept the world like a gusty wind. Was the Russian proposal a camouflage? Suddenly, to Walker, it became imperative that he know.

He leaned forward to scan the sky, marveling at the immensity of things. After a while, and still above them, he saw their quarry, a metal cylinder with the sun glinting off one side. The dart-winged plane was a gnat in an endless sea and the cylinder was a second gnat; yet the two were coming together. The eye of radar, the brain of the computer, and man. . . .

"She's not a manned job," Vollmer commented, "but she's plenty large."

"Lots of electronic gear," Walker reflected. "I glimpsed two or three saucers."

"She's not like any of the pix intelligence shuffled our way."

"What's the range, Hank?"

"Just over two thousand yards."

Walker exhaled slowly and said, "Might as well go the whole hog."

"Yeah, I can see us now, on every TV set in Moscow."

"I thought you wanted to be famous, Hank?"

"Not that famous," Vollmer snorted.

Walker adjusted the astroplane in yaw and pitch before briefly firing two rearward-pointing attitude control rockets. A scarcely perceptible vibration ran through his body and

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as quickly died. A moment later he noted the satellite appeared larger.

"Beach Boy to Zebra . . ." The radio crackled.

"Zebra . . . we're closing in," Walker answered.

"What's your range?"

"A shade over sixteen hundred yards."

"Cameras on?"

"Cameras on," Vollmer cut in.

"Don't approach any closer than necessary," Kirby warned.

"Can't see too much," Walker interrupted. "She's big, cylindrical, taper-nosed and unmanned. She has plenty of electronic gear."

"Any clues?"

"The gear? Nothing to hang a hat on, Sam." Walker fell silent, watching the satellite grow larger to his gaze. The saucers emerged from the night more clearly—fairly conventional type, he judged—and several close-snugged antennas came into view. It suddenly struck him that the satellite wasn't in tumble, yet by any reasonable standards it should be—unless it were attitude-controlled. It would take enormous amounts of fuel to maintain it in that state.

He was debating it uneasily when Vollmer sang out, "Nine hundred yards."

"Nine hundred yards," Walker repeated into the phones.

"How does she look, Jed?"

"Ominous." Immediately he wondered why he'd given that answer. But it was the way he felt; the strange satellite with her saucers and antennas somehow held a veiled threat that lay formless at the borders of his consciousness. Nerves? He smiled to himself; that was not the case at all.

"Jed?"

"Closing, Sam."

"Any change?"

"Nothing," he declared flatly. He returned his eyes to the satellite, measuring their slow closure. Somehow he was reminded of a cat stalking a mouse. But which was the cat? His lips twisted. The uncertainty was an agony he liked.

"Six hundred yards," Vollmer called stonily.

Walker twisted to glance at him. "Getting uneasy?"

"That baby has all the esthetic appeal of a time bomb," the copilot answered uncertainly.

"I feel the same, Hank, but I think we need a closer look." Walker raised his voice in the phones: "Closing in, Sam."

"Keep a sharp eye."

"Roger . . ." He stared toward the satellite again, pondering the dread in his mind.

Involuntarily he shivered.

Hunched over the phone in a console-filled chamber at Vandenberg Air Force Base, Major Sam Kirby's brows were furrowed in concentration. The chamber was a nerve center for a space communication network. Transmissions relayed through active satellites in high polar orbits kept the Air Force in constant touch with its giant MOLs—Manned Orbiting Laboratories. Now, monitoring the secret flight of the XMSV-1, Sam Kirby felt distinctly uneasy. Tall and rangy, with sand-colored hair, his hard, lantern-jawed face reflected his concern.

Rendezvous itself was no particular problem. Space crews had been perfecting the technique since the early days of Gemini; now they rendezvoused regularly above both Earth and moon. Although the XMSV-1 still was classed as an experimental vehicle, Kirby had the fullest confidence in the craft and its crew. Jed Walker was tops; so was Hank Vollmer. But the unknown puzzled him. Boosted from Novaya Zemlya? *Why from an ICBM base?* Silently he echoed the same question that had perturbed Walker.

Suppressing his uneasiness, Kirby looked around. Other figures wearing headphones hunched over consoles, eyes glued to dial faces and scopes. Occasionally someone stirred to make a report or adjust a setting. Automatic writing recorders spilled paper tapes on the floor.

Waiting, he put together what he knew about Novaya Zemlya. It was very little. Intelligence reported it to be a twenty-silo ICBM complex—large enough to destroy a major part of the United States, he knew. MOL crews had indicated intense activity near the western side of the northernmost island. Earlier photographs taken from orbit on an

unusually clear day had disclosed a gigantic excavation at the same site. Air photo interpreters had conjectured the building of a super silo. But even that report was more than a year old. Yet, coupled with other intelligence reports of a secret super missile, Kirby believed he discerned a pattern. One super silo plus one supermissile plus one secret launch from a hidden ICBM base added up to . . . what?

When Major General Joe Lampert entered, a stir ran through the room. Kirby swung around in his seat. A slender man with a high-arched nose, tight lips and thinning hair that showed streaks of gray, Lampert's dark eyes were set in deeply weathered folds. He came straight to Kirby's side.

"What's the situation?" he asked crisply.

"Jed's closing in for a closer look."

"I figured he might. What's the payload like?"

"Definitely unmanned," Kirby answered. "She has three saucers and some radio or radar gear. Hank estimates her diameter at around twelve feet, her length at around thirty."

"Twelve-foot diameter?" asked Lampert sharply. "That's too big for a *Voskhod* boost."

"The *Voskhod* report was preliminary," he explained.

Lampert rubbed his jaw. "Sounds more as if the payload were launched by one of their lunar boosters, Sam."

"The same thought occurred to me," he admitted.

"It could be a scientific mission."

"I don't believe so, sir."

"Why not?" Lampert demanded.

"Launched from Novaya Zemlya? They usually lift their scientific shots from Baikonur, by the Aral Sea." Kirby frowned. "I don't like it."

"Neither do I," Lampert admitted. "What's Jed's position?"

Kirby spoke into the phones, then turned back. "Moving in very slowly at slightly over five hundred yards. Hank's estimate of the payload size still holds."

"Tell Jed to watch it if she's in tumble."

"I'll pass the word." Realizing the danger, Kirby spoke into the phones. Lampert, no novice to space, had made a dozen trips into orbit and was an authority on rendezvous.

When viewed as a whole, a big mass in tumble might appear to be moving slowly, but the speed at the long ends of the axis was deceptive. If caught in the swing, the XMSV-1 would be crushed like an egg shell. He got Walker's answer and looked back.

"Jed says she's not in tumble."

"Not in tumble?" Lampert arched his eyes.

"Strange," Kirby commented. Again he felt uneasy.

"Tell Jed to watch every movement, Sam."

"Yes, sir." Kirby relayed the message into the phone.

Lampert asked, "When are they due to start down?"

Kirby glanced at the clock. "Three minutes, a few seconds over."

"Tell Jed to watch the time."

"I've cautioned Hank." Kirby hesitated and added, "I was remembering the report on the super silo we photographed."

"I've thought of that, Sam."

"And that super missile."

Lampert nodded gravely. "I've considered that."

"They could be related."

"Definitely," the General agreed.

Kirby tilted his head quizzically. "I don't like the timing." He saw the other's puzzled look and explained, "The coming peace talks."

"That's a political problem, Sam."

Sure, it's political. Kirby took a deep breath. Everything was political, but that didn't alter the situation. After more than two decades of cold and hot war during which the world had trembled in the shadow of the bomb, the tentative rapprochement between the world leaders—between the President and Chairman Igor Chernychev—seemed unreal in his mind. The grasp for peace was too fervid. Could the summit be a mask to hide another Sunday punch? He contemplated the question. During Anflov's tenure the ultimate catastrophe had appeared very close. He also had been thankful for Chernychev. Until now. Now he wasn't so certain. But if Chernychev were honest and if there were a chance for peace . . .

Another thought struck him and he said, "Word of this could wreck the conference."

"I've considered that." The dark eyes fixed Kirby levelly.

"Sky Sweep will have picked her up," he suggested.

"I plugged that gap before coming here," Lampert sighed.

"But we can't plug them all. A hundred different stations in a dozen countries monitor space, Sam."

Kirby's earphones crackled and Walker said, "I'd like to ask General Lampert's permission to move in closer, Sam. We've spotted what appears to be two tubes near the nose. We'd like to get a better angle to photograph them."

"Your time's running out," he warned.

"We can make it," Walker responded. "I believe this is important."

"Stand by. . . ." Kirby passed the request to the General.

"Tell Jed he's the decision-maker while he's up there," Lampert answered.

"Yes, sir." Kirby relayed the message.

"Okay, we're moving in," Walker replied.

"Give us a running account."

"Will do, Sam. We're at slightly over four hundred yards. I'm increasing our closure rate."

"Roger." Kirby passed the information to the General, unable to shake the impending feeling that had gripped him since Walker's decision to close with the strange satellite. Perhaps he would feel differently if he were up there, he reflected.

Vollmer's voice crackled through the phone with quickened intensity: "She's changing movement. . . ."

"Changing?" Kirby shot back. He felt a sudden alarm.

"She seems to be stabilizing herself. . . ."

"She's swinging her nose toward us," Walker cut in brusquely.

"Break away," Kirby rasped; "hit those engines." Lampert started to speak but clamped his lips shut.

"We're in retro."

"Dropping away yet?"

"Starting. That baby's nose is swinging fast."

"Where you saw the tubes?"

"She's reacting to us . . . some kind of sensors."

"Hit your main engines," Kirby rasped.

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"Our attitude's wrong. We'd go right through her. Oh! Oh!"

"What is it?" Kirby's throat muscles tightened.

"She . . . Mayday! Mayday!" The radio crackled, rose to a harsh whine and suddenly went dead.

"Mayday!" Kirby exclaimed hoarsely. He yelled frantically into the phones while knowing the futility of it. Mayday meant disaster! Counter-missiles! He knew it! The satellite had been armed! His breath caught at the significance. *My God, what's in the sky?*

He stared at Lampert. The General's face was tight. His eyes were bleak, stone hard. "So much for the space treaty," he rasped.

Space treaty! No bombs in orbit—that's what the treaty said. Kirby clenched his fists. Another damned scrap of paper!

The General's voice changed. He looked up as if viewing the sky. "They didn't die in vain, Sam. We know what's up there."

"Yeah"—Kirby's throat was dry—"we know."

THREE

Time: 9:10 A.M., 7 July 1973.

Place: The Pentagon, Washington, D.C.

GENERAL JAMES GUYER, Air Force Chief of Staff, replaced the scrambler phone in its cradle, feeling the tumult rise within him. *A secret launch from Novaya Zemlya! The XMSV-1 destroyed, apparently by missile fire*—Joe Lampert's words came back, beating in his brain like a loud drum. Joe Lampert had been shaken and he didn't shake easily. He was steady, as iron-nerved as they came, and not given to quick conclusions. "*They've placed a nuclear warhead up there, Jim. I'd stake my reputation on it.*" That, coming from Lampert, was the equivalent of fact.

Guyer contemplated the space treaty and smiled wanly. Treaties didn't lock launching pads! Somehow he wasn't surprised. He felt only a fleeting regret over the deaths of

Jed Walker and Hank Vollmer. He'd known both as fine, courageous officers, but the implications behind Lampert's words left little time for lament. How much time?

The peace talks. The words popped unbidden into his mind. In two weeks the President was slated to meet with Chairman Igor Chernychev in what widely was heralded as "the dawn of peace." Thank God Joe had the foresight to clamp a tight security lid over the whole affair. The loss of the XMSV-1 would leak, of course; some reporter would grab that quick. But if word of the orbital launch got out, if it were coupled with the loss of the astroplane . . .

My God, what was he thinking of? The conference was the least of his worries. He forced himself to calmness. Was the meeting between the President and Chernychev a blind? Was the U.S. being set up as a clay pigeon? *It's Cuba all over again*, he reflected bitterly.

He drummed his fingers against the desk. Orbital bomb or no bomb, the U.S. could wipe Russia from the face of the Earth, even in the wake of a surprise attack. Chernychev knew that. So did Marshal Trofimuk and his gang of neo-Stalinists. Would they risk it? Logic told him no. Yet, *something* had been launched, and Joe Lampert believed that something was a nuclear warhead. A warhead with anti-missiles, he reflected grimly.

What could he do? He felt a wave of helplessness. My God, he was just an old general, tired and flabby and heavy with the weight of too many conferences, endless sessions in the battle of the budget. How long had it been since he'd stirred the controls of a plane? Not since Korea. For a moment he remembered the roar of the jets, the exhilaration that came with his first Mig.

But then they'd boosted him upstairs, higher and higher, and with each step he'd grown further away from the plane; bombs and rockets had been replaced by facts and figures and charts. The cocktail circuit, buttonholing congressmen . . . Now this! Lampert had cut straight across the lines. *"We haven't time for all the red tape, Jim!"* With that, Lampert had dropped it squarely on him. Unconsciously he squared his shoulders.

The cocktail circuit was at an end.

But what could he do? The Secretary of the Air Force was in the hospital getting an ulcer patched. Admiral Philip Massey, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was out of the country. That left Gerald McCloud, Secretary for Defense. He grimaced. McCloud was a wait-and-see man, but Guyer had the definite feeling there was no time to wait. Yet, he knew, he had no recourse. He'd have to push McCloud into going to the President.

He put through a call to the Secretary and, at his insistence, got an immediate appointment. Starting to rise, he subsided back into his chair and put through a call to a private number, this time to Colonel Chester Hammit, formerly of Air Force Intelligence and now high in the CIA. Ostensibly, Hammit was the Far East expert; in reality he was a specialist in CCI—Communist Counter-Intelligence.

Hammit came on the phone immediately. "Nice to hear from you, Jim," he said. "What do you have in mind?"

"Could you stop by?" Guyer asked obliquely.

"On the way," Hammit responded. "Your office?"

"Wait, if I'm not here," he instructed. Replacing the phone, he began to plan. Perhaps he could make McCloud see the light of day.

Defense Secretary Gerald McCloud was past middle age, thin and balding, with stooped shoulders and a narrow face that verged on primness. His eyes were a frosty blue. Since coming to the Department of Defense from the presidency of a large Midwestern manufacturing concern, he'd acquired a formidable reputation as a genius in systems management and an equally formidable one as a bumbler in human relations. In the past, Guyer had found him adamant and set in his views. This was the man who confronted him as he related Joe Lampert's report.

Finished, he leaned back to wait for some clue. Crushing a cigaret in a tray, McCloud watched him. His eyes were measuring and little else; his demeanor gave no clue to his thoughts. Guyer remembered the description of the man as a machine and believed it apt; McCloud appeared absolutely without emotion.

"We have no proof that it is an orbital weapon," McCloud said finally.

"Only by deduction," Guyer acknowledged.

"Which doesn't always lead to fact," the Secretary observed. He raised his eyes. "We also have a space treaty."

Guyer brushed the point aside and said, "We know Anfilov was developing such a bomb."

"Anfilov's dead now, General."

"Are his followers? Is Marshal Trofimuk?"

"I'm aware of the intelligence reports," McCloud chided.

"We also know they built a super silo on Novaya Zemlya," Guyer returned stonily. "We photographed it."

"The photo was interpreted in that light, yes."

Guyer said tightly, "The booster was launched from there. Both the pilot and the copilot observed it, photographed it. We have their description on tape." He tried to suppress the sinking sensation inside him. Plainly McCloud wasn't overly impressed. He'd probably hang on to that space treaty bit.

"We don't know the nature of the launch," McCloud rebutted.

"From an ICBM base?"

"That doesn't make it a weapon."

"Whatever's up there shot down the XMSV-1," retorted Guyer. "Doesn't that sound like a hostile act?"

"We don't know that it was shot down. Nothing in General Lampert's report confirms that."

"We know the satellite was changing attitude to bring the tubes Walker spotted to bear on the plane," Guyer made an effort to restrain his voice. "There'd be no reason for the satellite to change attitude unless it had sensed the plane, was homing in on it. And Walker knew it; he was trying to get out of there, and fast. He was in retrofire when the plane was destroyed."

"Couldn't it have exploded? After all, the plane was experimental, largely untried, at least in space."

"At just that instant? I don't believe in coincidences of that nature," Guyer declared emphatically. He leaned forward. "I doubt that Walker would have had time to shout a warning if the plane had exploded."

"We don't know that, General."

"You would if you'd ever flown one of those jobs," Guyer shot back stiffly. He felt the anger sweep through him. My God, didn't the man understand anything? He fought to keep his emotion under control.

McCloud said icily, "I'll concede that I'm not a pilot."

"The events leading up to the astroplane's destruction indicate that it came from counter-action—a rocket missile of some type," Guyer declared. "Joe Lampert believes that and I believe it."

"But we don't know it; that's the whole point."

"When does probability become certainty?" demanded Guyer.

"Never; that's the nature of mathematics," asserted McCloud. He leaned back, folded his hands and regarded the General through rimless spectacles. Finally he broke the heavy silence. "Have you considered the implications of such a charge? Even a hint of this would scuttle the President's meeting with Chairman Chernychev. The Nation would be in a furor, General."

"I've considered the implications behind a nuclear bomb in orbit," Guyer rejoined.

"That's your job."

"And if I believe there's a bomb up there?"

"Belief is a middle ground," McCloud observed acidly. "This is an all-or-none problem. Can you state definitely that it is a bomb—a nuclear bomb?"

Guyer grated, "So we wait till they drop it?"

"Frankly, I can't see that as a danger, General."

"Because of the peace conference?" Guyer leaned forward and said placatingly, "What better time could they choose? Everyone caught with the hope of peace, our guard down . . ."

"Is it down?" McCloud interjected. He lifted his head, gazing at Guyer down the long bridge of his nose.

"Over the Nation as a whole, yes; at least psychologically."

"I was referring to our military readiness, General."

"No," he answered reluctantly.

"Then we have no worry on that score."

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"There's plenty to worry about," he snapped, feeling the last of his patience depart. McCloud was absolutely obtuse. Had he made any dent at all? Lord, if only Phil Massey were back. Perhaps between the two of them . . .

"We have absolutely no reason to doubt Chernychev's sincere desire for peace," McCloud asserted. "He's committed his government to that course, General, to the point where he couldn't survive a failure."

"Do we know that? Can we state that with certainty?"

"The State Department feels certain. I was speaking with Kimball yesterday. . . ."

"How about Marshal Trofimuk?" cut in Guyer. "Does he want peace?"

McCloud looked annoyed. "Trofimuk doesn't enter into the picture," he replied shortly.

"How do we know what goes on behind the Kremlin walls?"

"That's State's province, General."

"I'm trying to look at the realities of the situation."

McCloud raised his eyes. "Realities?"

"Trofimuk would launch that bomb in a minute," Guyer declared. "If Chernychev is such a dove, how come he didn't scrap it? He's had six months."

"Scarcely enough time to consolidate his strength." McCloud's face grew colder. "We're wasting time discussing issues that properly fall in State's province. I'm certain Secretary Kimball knows exactly what he's doing, General."

"Then we take no action?"

McCloud snapped testily, "We'll investigate, of course."

Holding back a sharp reply, Guyer stared at him. Slowly he said, "The President should be informed immediately." He knew he'd overstepped his bounds, but didn't care. Someone had to carry the ball.

"I'll make that decision, General." McCloud glanced at his watch and nodded frostily, signifying the session was at an end.

Guyer stood slowly, legs spraddled, looking down at the Secretary before he nodded curtly and turned away, afraid to risk speaking. Inside, he was boiling—not at his cavalier

treatment at McCloud's hands, but at the other's refusal to acknowledge the danger, or to take prompt action.

Striding down the corridor, he wondered how the Nation had managed to survive as long as it had. Because of men like Admiral Philip Massey, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, and Joe Lampert, he concluded. Yes, and men like Jed Walker and Hank Vollmer and Chet Hammit. Because of them, nincompoops like Gerald McCloud managed to survive and even reach high office. Well, he'd be damned if he'd take it sitting.

By the time he reached his office his anger was gone, replaced by a gnawing worry. The rocket boosted from Novaya Zemlya was a nuclear warhead. The certainty in his mind left scant room for doubt; the indications were too positive.

He forced himself to contemplate the possibility dispassionately. Russia wouldn't launch the bomb unless she intended to drop it. That much was certain, for the bomb couldn't be recalled; it could only plunge to Earth in its role of death and destruction. Guyer clenched his fists; he could see the great mushroom cloud rising, etched in his mind's eye with a clarity that made him wince.

What could he do? The earlier question rushed back, beating like a pulse in his brain. Given time, they might rendezvous with the bomb, using some of the hardware they had, perhaps destroy it with rocket fire. Perhaps and perhaps and perhaps. McCloud wouldn't buy that, he knew—not with the peace conference at stake, and not without certain knowledge of the satellite's nature.

"To hell with McCloud," he gritted savagely. He wasn't finished yet. He placed a call to General Lampert, and momentarily was dismayed to find he wasn't available. No, they didn't know where the General was. He'd left earlier. Contemplating it, Guyer's lips twisted with satisfaction. Joe Lampert wasn't waiting; wherever he was, he was doing something about the bomb.

He knew that with certainty.

Rising, he went to the code room and sent a top priority message to Admiral Massey. When he returned, Chester Hammit was waiting in his office.

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"Lord, I'm glad to see you." Guyer extended a firm hand. "How'd you make it so fast?"

"Chopper," Hammit replied. "Saves time. What's the flap?" Lean and graying, he was on the short side, with quick, dark eyes that watched the Chief of Staff intently. His skin was dark and weathered.

"I believe Russia's pulling a fast one, Chet." Guyer's lips twisted bitterly. "They launched an orbital missile from Novaya Zemlya that shot down the XMSV-1. Jed Walker was investigating when he got it. Joe Lampert thinks it's a nuclear bomb."

Chet Hammit's face showed no emotion; his eyes were unmoving. "Better give me the whole story, Jim."

"Jed Walker and Hank Vollmer were flight-testing the XMSV-1 in orbit when they saw the booster, then Hank caught the payload on the radarscope," Guyer explained. He recounted the sequence of events, ending with his meeting with McCloud. "He won't budge—afraid of wrecking the peace conference," he ended.

"Did he say that?"

"That he won't budge? He said he'd investigate. You know what that means." Guyer smiled mirthlessly. "He also quoted the space treaty."

"The President won't be that naive." Hammit eyed him. "What are you doing about it?"

"Trying to reach Massey and Lampert."

"Lampert?"

"He's disappeared."

"Taking action; you can bet on that, Jim."

"I'm not worried on that score." Guyer leaned forward. "What the hell is going on in the Kremlin, Chet? Tell me that. McCloud says State is satisfied that Chernychev is sincere."

"I believe he is," Hammit answered slowly.

"Trofimuk?"

"Possibly. One hell of a struggle has been going on since Anfilov's assassination."

"Assassination?"

"We believe that to be the case."

"Trofimuk?" Guyer repeated.

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"Probably; there's a lot we don't know. But he was thirsty for power, and probably wasn't willing to wait his turn. I'm convinced that Chernychev beat him out simply because the rank and file of the *politburo* feared nuclear war under Trofimuk. Russia wants power, Jim, but she doesn't want it that much. She has too much to lose by war and knows it."

"Someone isn't that cautious," Guyer observed shrewdly.

"That baffles me." Hammit's brow creased in a puzzled frown. "Not that Russia's war party has faded from the picture. The neo-Stalinists and pro-Chinese are a constant threat."

"Aren't they one and the same?"

"Not necessarily." Hammit shook his head. "Trofimuk has played footsies with Peking but he wants to head the show, and so does Peking. It's a strange alliance, Jim."

"I'm not worried about Peking, not at this point," Guyer declared emphatically.

"You can't tell."

"Meaning?"

"Peng Yi, the Chinese Chairman, was the last man who wanted to see Chernychev succeed Anflov. He fears a united U.S./Russian front. Behind the scenes, at least, he backed Trofimuk."

"Looks more and more like Trofimuk," Guyer observed.

"It's not that simple, Jim."

"You tell me," he suggested.

"If Trofimuk were the bomb master—I suppose I can use that term—then Chernychev must have lost out in the battle for power." Hammit shook his head slowly. "We have no indication of that."

"How do you account for the bomb?" demanded Guyer. "Don't tell me I'm crazy—not after we lost the XMSV-1."

"Oh, there's a nuclear warhead up there, all right. I was convinced of that when you said it was Joe Lampert's belief. Joe isn't a guesser."

"So what do we do? McCloud won't go to the President—not until he knows for certain."

Hammit's eyes came up. "The President will know before the day's out, Jim."

"Can you guarantee that?"

"That's the good thing about the CIA. We have pipelines of which McCloud never dreamed." Hammit hesitated. "But I'm not certain what he can do."

"The President? He can put this Nation on full alert, give them an ultimatum. . . ."

"Chernychev?" Hammit interrupted.

Guyer hesitated, seeing the logic in the other's point. If Chernychev were sincere . . . But how could that be? Either Chernychev was in and was responsible, or he was out. In the latter case, the ultimatum would go to whoever was in. He said so.

"Suppose you're right. Suppose we handed them an ultimatum and they bought it. How would they dispose of the bomb?"

"We could do that," he promised savagely. "Given time, we could knock it out of the sky."

"Given time?" Hammit eyed him sharply.

"We have a follow-up to the XMSV-1 almost flight-ready," Guyer explained. "Of course, it hasn't been flight-tested."

"Is that a possibility, Jim?"

"Getting the XMSV-2 spaceborne in time to do us any good? I believe it is."

"What does Lampert think?"

"That's why I was trying to get him. If anyone can get that baby up there, it's Joe. He has a pilot out there—Sam Kirby—who could fly it, tested or not."

"I know Sam," Hammit acceded. "You're right on that score."

Guyer blinked, surprised. He knew that Hammit was more than casually acquainted with generals, admirals and heads of state, both in this country and in others, but he hadn't expected him to know a relatively obscure pilot. There seemed no end to the people Hammit did know.

Hammit closed his eyes thoughtfully, then snapped them open again. "Russia will have to acknowledge launching *something*," he observed. "By now every tracking station in the world will have picked it up—Jodrell Bank, for one."

"You're saying?" Guyer watched him intently.

"They'll have to acknowledge it, lie about it, or drop

it," he said succinctly. In the quiet of the room, the words to Guyer held the impact of an atom bomb. "We'll have to work fast, Jim."

"I'm groping," Guyer rubbed his jaw.

"Get with Massey as soon as you can."

"And you?"

"I'll see that the President gets this."

"Anything else?" he asked hopefully.

"I don't know; I really don't." Hammit rose. "I'll tap the pipelines, every single one."

"Tap the one to the Kremlin," urged Guyer. Suddenly he felt that time was ebbing, that very little time was left.

"I'll do that," Hammit smiled faintly. "And I'll tap the line to Peking."

Guyer arched his brows. "Why Peking?"

"No reason," Hammit answered blandly. "I'm just suspicious by nature."

"So am I," echoed Guyer. He looked up and realized he was talking to an empty room.

Hammit had vanished as quietly as he'd arrived.

BRITISH REPORT NEW SATELLITE—the headlines of the small story buried in the back pages of the *Washington Post* leaped to meet Guyer's eyes. It had been circled with red pencil by a staff officer, who'd forwarded it to the Chief of Staff as a matter of interest.

So soon? He scanned the story quickly. It originated at Jodrell Bank. The story speculated that the satellite possibly was the upper stage of a manned Russian rocket launched from the Baikonur Cosmodrome. It added that no comment was available from Russia.

Guyer swore softly. He'd spent considerable time making certain that trackings by American stations were kept under wraps. He'd known that foreign monitors would pick it up, as Hammit had predicted, yet had hoped for the best. Perhaps that would end it. Even strange satellites were too common to remain long in the news.

He let the paper slip from his fingers, moodily questioning what he'd accomplished in the few hours since getting Joe Lampert's electrifying call. Lampert still was out of touch;

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Admiral Philip Massey secretly was rushing back from London; Sky Sweep had plotted the satellite's orbital path. But no word from McCloud—nothing to indicate the President was aware that a nuclear holocaust could erupt momentarily.

He'd gone out on the limb as far as he could, he thought grimly. He'd communicated his suspicions to several key field commanders by coded message and scrambler phone; now, various military exercises were taking place announced. Two wings of supersonic bombers were aloft over the Arctic, their bellies laden with hydrogen weapons; missile crews at super ICBM bases were running through countdown drills; two nuclear submarines were making unscheduled runs to strategic locations. None of these elements could take action, of course, but if the President gave the go signal, they'd be on station, instantly ready.

But it wasn't enough. Wearily he knew it. Everything he'd done had been precautionary. The nuclear warhead was still there, in orbit, and while it was, the world unknowingly tottered on a hellish brink. And if the Americans were in the countdown, so were the Russians. How far were they from time Zero? He had no answer.

That was one unpredictable. The second was Chet Hammit's call over the scrambler phone several hours earlier. China was massing her armies—that was the gist of it. Huge troop movements were occurring along the Indian and Russian frontiers, and opposite Formosa.

Hammit saw two possibilities. "One is that they've tracked the satellite, know that it's a warhead and that it's Russian, and suspect it may be aimed against them."

"Why would they suspect that?" Guyer demanded.

"With Chernychev in power? He's pro-West, Jim, at least in their eyes."

"What's the second possibility?"

"That Trofimuk has taken over. Peng Yi's sharp, Jim. He knows that if Trofimuk pushes the button, both Russia and the United States would be devastated."

"So he moves in, eh?"

"A distinct possibility," Hammit replied.

"Trofimuk's looming larger all the time," Guyer reflected.

"Yes, he is."

"Is that knowledge out?"

"That China's massing? Not yet, but it soon will be. You can't hide major troop movements in this day and age, Jim."

"Does the President know yet?"

"About China or . . . the other?"

"Both."

"I suspect he'll hear soon."

"So what do we do?"

"Sweat it out," Hammit advised. "Once the President knows . . ." He paused and for a long moment the phone was silent.

"All right, I'll sweat," Guyer grunted finally. Since then he'd had no further word from the CIA man.

Gazing through the window as the dusk gathered over the city, Guyer heard footsteps outside his door. An instant later General Lampert strode in. Wearing mufti, his face was grim. Guyer rose quickly. "Thank the Lord," he exclaimed.

"I flew over as quickly as possible," Lampert said. They exchanged a brief handclasp and sat down. "I've broken every other rule in the book so I thought I might as well cut across lines and see you directly," he explained.

"Glad you did, Joe." Guyer saw the tiredness in the other's face. "I've broken a few myself."

"I take it that McCloud didn't buy our theory," Lampert observed.

"He's afraid of wrecking the peace conference."

"With a bomb in the sky?"

"We can't prove that, not to his satisfaction."

Lampert asked bitterly, "What does he think happened to the XMSV-1?"

"He suggested an explosion."

"Good Lord!" Lampert's eyes grew suddenly suspicious. "Hasn't he alerted the President?"

"I'm afraid not." Guyer's voice grew brittle. "I took it on myself to pass the story to Chet Hammit."

"Chet Hammit, eh?" Lampert gave a relieved sigh. "He'll get it to the President."

Guyter tilted his head. "Better fill me in on your day, Joe."

"I told you I broke a few rules," Lampert said. "I gave Westwood Aircraft exactly five days to get the XMSV-2 on the field, flight-ready."

"Five days," Guyter exclaimed wonderingly. "Is it possible?"

Lampert nodded. "They were scheduled to deliver it for initial flight testing in three weeks. They'll make it, working around the clock."

Guyter felt a glimmer of hope. "Who will fly her, Sam Kirby?"

"He can't wait."

"How about the copilot?"

"I have one in mind," Lampert answered obliquely.

Guyter didn't press the point, but instead asked, "What about the missiles on that bomb wagon? We can't lose this one, Joe."

Lampert smiled slightly. "We're installing a few ourselves. Sam will be able to talk back; I can guarantee that."

"Good." Guyter leaned forward intently. "That brings up another ticklish point."

"The woods are full of ticklish points, Jim." Lampert settled back in his chair, waiting.

"We just can't clobber that baby without absolute proof that it is a warhead. McCloud wouldn't buy that; neither would the President, and I have the strange feeling that I'm going to be talking with him before long. I want the answers, Joe."

"That already occurred to me," Lampert admitted. "I talked with the think factory. They have some instrumentation that might do the trick."

"Determine whether or not it is a nuclear weapon?" asked Guyter. "They'd have to operate from a distance—from beyond the range of any counter-missiles. I never knew they could do that."

"They probably couldn't when I asked, but they can now," Lampert declared. "They're drumming up a gizmo based on a neutron gun which will cause a passive pile to

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give off alpha radiation that they can detect with a scintillation counter."

"Wouldn't that activate the pile?"

"Not if you control the neutron bombardment."

"You have been busy." Guyer felt pleased.

"Like a one-armed blackjack dealer," Lampert affirmed. "Sam's over at the factory riding herd. We'll make it—if we have five days."

"If," he echoed. He told Lampert of his day, and of the Chinese moves. "Chet says they're massing all along their borders."

"I can't figure that," Lampert commented. "I can't see Peng Yi making hostile moves with that bomb in the sky."

"Nor can I."

Lampert's eyes came up. "I keep thinking there's something we don't know."

"There's a lot we don't know," he affirmed. He regarded his friend, briefly remembering the years past when Lampert had flown as his wing man in the blue skies above Korea. Joe had made himself an ace, yet he was the one who had climbed to the top command. Why was that? He was the better paper shuffler, he reflected. Joe was an action man. As commanding general of the vast Air Force Flight Test Center at Edwards Air Force Base on the Mojave Desert, Joe Lampert was a man who'd wrung out his own plans until the higher brass had given an official frown; they believed that flying the needle-nosed X-rockets was a younger man's game.

Guyer remained gazing through the window long after Lampert had departed. *If Joe could get the XMSV-2 into space within five days . . . If we have five days*, he corrected softly. If and if and if. Occasionally he glanced toward the phone, waiting for it to ring.

Finally it did.

Time: 11:15 P.M., 8 July 1973.

Place: Great Hall of the People, Peking.

WONG SI FEE, director of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, felt vaguely perturbed. Toying with the tidbits of pressed duck and pickled fish that remained on his plate, he covertly scanned the faces in the private banquet room in the Great Hall of the People. Peng Yi, Chairman of the Communist Party, sat at the head table. Slender and austere in his simple gray jacket, he appeared far more youthful than Wong knew him to be.

Wong let his gaze dwell on him. At the moment, Peng's features were deeply contemplative as he listened to Hu Ning, his Minister of Information. Peng's face was lean and ascetic, both intelligent and cruel, and like his dark eyes, could be instantly changeable. The Chairman, at times, was quite the convivial host.

Peng had announced the affair most precipitously, but nothing during the long evening of feasting, drinking, and across-the-table conversation had given Wong the slightest inkling as to its purpose. Yet, because he'd known Peng for many years, both as his confidant and scientific advisor, he knew the Chairman *never* acted without motive.

The river laughs at dawn and broods at dusk—the proverb flashed through Wong's mind. Peng was like that, he thought, unpredictable in moods and action, faithful to ideals if not to people. Yet, undoubtedly he was a great man, and history would record him as such. But at times Wong wondered at the gnawing doubt within him.

He shifted his gaze. The group appeared large only because of the room's small size, he decided. Altogether, not more than two dozen persons were present. But they were the elite—the key people in the power structure Peng had welded together to enable him to take over the reins from an aging chairman several years earlier.

His eyes roved. Premier Tan Fu-chun, beloved and hon-

ored by the people; Kuo Li-San, Chairman of the National People's Congress; Marshal Huang Shao-chi, the aging warrior who'd made the Long March that had ended with the fall of the Kuomintang and the rise of the People's Republic, and Wu Han, who headed the Secret Police. The latter, in Wong's eyes, was a shadowy, sinister figure. Perhaps, he reflected, it was because he knew very little of Wu Han's activities; but then, very few people did. Last, his eyes fell on General Li Chi, the youthful, rapidly-rising head of China's armies. The General was, in Wong's mind, a brilliant man; like the Chairman, he was cold and inscrutable.

Abruptly he looked back as the Chairman rapped sharply and rose with lifted glass. "To the People's Republic of China," he toasted. His voice held a vibrant ring.

"To the People's Republic . . ." Wong heard the words spill automatically from his lips as he joined the chorus. Lifted glasses were tilted. As Peng remained standing, the room grew silent. Finally he spoke.

"Yesterday," he announced, "a great nuclear warhead was lofted into space from a secret Russian ICBM base." Startled exclamations broke out and a quick buzz ran through the room. Wong watched the Chairman, aghast, his mind denying what he'd heard. Peng's face held a faint smile; clearly he was enjoying the moment. When the quiet came again, he continued, "With that bomb, China will become master of the world."

A cheer broke out but quickly subsided as Premier Tan Fu-chun feebly rose from his chair. Because he was ancient, much venerated, and had guided the Chinese Communist Party in its youth, there was a respectful silence. Wong watched him hopefully. Comrade Tan was a man of peace! Almost instantly he felt the hope subside. Tan was old, his star in eclipse; he held his present position only through the Chairman's sufferance.

Tan regarded the Chairman for a long moment before he said, "We would appreciate the details, comrade Peng."

The Chairman nodded. "The details are quite complicated, comrade Tan," he explained, "But when our imperialist friends across the sea discover a nuclear warhead in the

sky, I would expect a quick nuclear exchange. I can't see that any of the Western nations would escape," he added dryly.

Tan Fu-chun, who had remained standing, observed gravely, "I would not have expected that of comrade Chernychev. He was—by all reports—moving toward peace. I understand that it was he who first approached the American President on the subject."

"The precise reason for the bomb," Peng answered.

Tan Fu-chun watched him, his ancient eyes troubled.

"Please explain, comrade Peng," he persisted.

"Marshal Trofimuk launched the bomb."

"Then Chairman Chernychev has fallen?"

"Not yet, but the office soon will cease to exist." Peng smiled coldly. A restlessness ran through the room and new voices broke in.

Following the exchange, Wong felt stricken. The nuclear warhead, he knew, was the cobalt bomb Anfilov had built in secrecy. For a while, China had lived fearfully in the bomb's shadow, for Anfilov was treacherous, even during the days of "The Great Rapport." But Anfilov had died when the cloud was darkest, and China had breathed again. A short respite, Wong feared. Trofimuk was as treacherous as Anfilov had been; and the bomb was unleashed.

"*He'll set the world afire,*" he murmured. In the aftermath of such a holocaust there could be no master; there could be only desolation, the quietness of death. Couldn't Peng understand that? Surely the Chairman . . .

Wong struggled to pull his thoughts together. Politicians, he decided, were fools. Peng spoke as if China were a huge island, separated from the remainder of the world by an unbridgeable gulf. In truth, it was a small planet; the world was careening toward doomsday. He'd sensed that for a long time but never quite so starkly as now. How could Peng imagine that China would escape unscathed? Was he willing to sacrifice half the population that the survivors might inherit the Earth? A mad hope.

He saw that Peng had left his place at the head table and was making his way slowly through the room, pausing from time to time to chat with one or another of his guests.

His face was wreathed in a pleasant smile; several times he laughed exultantly.

The Chairman paused by the side of the aged Marshal Huang Shao-chi and loudly proclaimed, "For many years we marched side by side in the Civil War, and for more than a decade against the Japanese."

"That is true," Marshal Huang Shao-chi affirmed.

"And now we march against the world."

"Our ancestors long have awaited this day."

"We shall deliver them from their suspense," promised Peng. Wong looked away, hoping that his face showed none of what he felt. Peng, his friend, also could be his executioner; that was a fact of life he'd long known. Peng held him in high esteem, as long as they traveled the same road. Wong's eyes fell on Tan Fu-chun. The Premier's face held a look of sorrow. He, of all men, knows, Wong thought. His attention returned with a start.

Peng Yi had paused at his side.

"You do not appear rejoicing," the Chairman observed.

Wong stood and bowed slightly. "We scientists fear the atom, comrade Peng."

Peng laughed. "You should have a soldier's heart."

"Alas, the atom knows neither friend nor foe."

"You are a philosopher, Wong."

"A fearful one," he admitted.

"Not without reason, I'm certain." Peng's smile remained but his eyes took on a sharp, quizzical look that didn't escape Wong.

He said boldly, "I fear Marshal Trofimuk."

"You fear he'll drop the bomb on us?"

"That is my fear," he admitted.

Peng threw back his head and laughed, then moved his face closer and confided in a lowered voice, "Comrade Trofimuk already is in the backwash of history."

"But if his finger's on the button?"

"Battles are won in the planning department, Wong, not on the battlefield."

"I'm afraid I don't understand."

"The code Marshal Trofimuk will use to start the bomb down from orbit is not the proper one," Peng explained.

"The proper one has been transferred here to Peking. My finger is on the button." Laughing exultantly, he walked on.

The party gradually fragmented into small groups, each excitedly discussing the Chairman's revelation. Wong noted that Peng Yi was closeted with Premier Tan Fu-chun and Marshal Huang Shao-chi. Tan's face was grave, Peng's polite; the Marshal appeared very stern.

Off to one side he saw Li Chi, the youthful general, sitting apart from the other guests. In the light from the chandelier, Li's face was the color of polished mahogany. High cheekbones and hollows above the jaw gave it a gaunt appearance. His eyes, riveted on the Chairman, appeared curiously blank. He couldn't approve, Wong thought. As a soldier, he most certainly would realize the dire consequences to follow. Wong wondered at his thoughts.

Finding himself unobserved, he slipped from the room, pausing in the outer hall under the great crystal chandeliers, aware that he trembled as with ague. His limbs felt weak. He descended a magnificent flight of stairs to the spacious foyer and went out into the night. The breeze was cool on his cheek.

Passing through Tien An Men, the Gate of Heavenly Peace, his eyes drank in the curved roofs of the ancient Imperial Palace. It brooded over the city, he thought, like a watchful ancestor. *The Eternal City*—he felt a hollowness in his mind. How many eternal cities now were dust? Why did man seek to destroy himself? Why? The question was a pain in his mind.

What could he do? He contemplated the question hopelessly. There was nothing, nothing at all. We have played a shadow game and lost, he thought dismally. The monster Trofimuk had unleashed had become the master; how could Peng fail to realize that? Now Trofimuk was helpless and Peng was helpless, even though neither probably realized it. Both were filled with dreams.

He reached Shi Chang An Chieh, the main boulevard that crossed the city in an east-west direction, and turned toward his home. In the late hour, only a few people were visible—men wearing open-collar shirts and slacks and women in trousers and gay blouses. An occasional pedicab sped

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past. He watched a young couple ahead of him strolling with hands clasped and smiled wistfully; how little time they had!

Wong's steps slowed as he drew near his home. Finally he halted and glanced at his watch. It was well after midnight. Hesitating, he felt his desperation grow again. It welled inside him like a great balloon, threatening to explode. He could do nothing, yet the knowledge was too tormenting to contain. If he could talk with Lu he'd feel better, he thought. Yes, he'd talk with Lu.

Despite the lateness of the hour, he turned back toward the main boulevard to hail a pedicab. Lu Sing Kai, the president of Peking University, was a man of great wisdom. How much time was left?

He hurried along the darkened street.

Waiting on a reed couch in a small room where a sleepy-eyed servant had led him, Wong wondered why he was there, and at such a late hour. Lu Sing Kai was old and feeble; it wasn't fair to burden him with this. Yet, he reasoned despairingly, the remaining hours were so few.

Bamboo rustled faintly against the window and his nostrils caught the scent of a fragrant incense. Through the glass he glimpsed the pagoda-like structure which masked the campus water tower. Sighing, he remembered the long-ago years when he'd walked the shaded grounds, his mind singing with the knowledge bequeathed him. Now it all seemed futile.

Movement came from an adjoining room and he turned as Lu Sing Kai, the president of Peking University, limped through an arch, his wispy body draped in a black mandarin gown. His lined face, in the dim light, held a serene look.

Wong sprang to his feet. "I must apologize for coming at such a late hour," he exclaimed.

"You are troubled," Lu Sing Kai said gently.

"The world is troubled."

"And yet it is a lovely place." Lu Sing Kai gently lowered his frail body into a wicker chair. "Is that not so?"

"Too lovely to be lost," Wong answered bitterly.

"God giveth and God taketh, my friend."

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Wong gazed at him. The aged scholar had been father, friend, counselor and confidant to him for almost more years than he could remember—since that long-ago time when he'd also been his professor. Lu Sing Kai had spurred him on to what little greatness had been granted him; now he had come to lay a great burden on the old man's frail shoulders.

"I come from Peng Yi's banquet," he said.

"Another pronouncement?" Lu Sing Kai smiled wistfully. "What does comrade Peng say?"

"Russia has launched a nuclear warhead into orbit."

"Anfilov's bomb," the educator murmured.

Wong suppressed his surprise. "You know of it?"

"Very few whispers fail to travel the academic halls, and old men have ears like saucers." The educator nodded. "Yes, I know of it, but I had thought better of comrade Chernychev."

"It was launched by Marshal Trofimuk."

"Then comrade Chernychev has fallen?" asked Lu Sing Kai sorrowfully.

"Not yet, but what difference does it make?"

"An empty honor," the educator agreed.

"He also expects America and Russia to destroy each other once America learns of the bomb."

"Leaving comrade Peng the master of the world, no doubt," the old man observed dryly.

"That is his plan."

"Comrade Peng knows so little of history."

"Yet he controls it," Wong exclaimed. "Destiny is in his hand." He leaned forward and the words spilled forth in a torrent; getting them out was the catharsis he needed. With it, he realized he was groping for a source of hope. In his youth, Lu Sing Kai had traveled the world, was ripe with the wisdom of years.

Wong came to the part where Peng had confided that he and not Trofimuk controlled the bomb, and faltered. That he could not tell his aged friend, for even the walls had ears, and if the faintest hint reached Peng . . . He shuddered at the consequences, at the same time wondered at his fear. Would not the bomb resolve it all?

Finished, he glanced beseechingly at the other. In the si-

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lence that followed, he heard the bamboo scraping across the window. It reminded him of a child's plaintive cry in the night.

"Comrade Peng has great trust in Marshal Trofimuk," Lu Sing Kai observed finally. His eyes held a puzzled look.

"Peng knows the bomb is destined for America," he explained lamely.

"Yet China is the greater threat."

"China?" Wong lifted his head, surprised.

"We are a flowering seed bursting outward and Russia is a fertile plain."

"But the power resides in America!"

"That is true."

"If comrade Chernychev and the President of the United States were allowed to meet, Trofimuk's reach for power would be forever ended," Wong explained. "He had to move now."

"True," Lu Sing Kai murmured, but the puzzled look remained in his eyes.

"What can be done?" he asked despairingly.

"Life is a chess game," Lu Sing Kai advised. "For every move there is a counter move."

"I fail to see it."

"Because you are bleak with despair."

"With the world tottering?"

"Somewhere men are acting," Lu Sing Kai returned. He cocked his head inquisitively. "How does comrade Peng know that Trofimuk launched the bomb?"

"The trackers," he blurted desperately. He felt a sudden trepidation that the other had guessed his secret. If word got out that control of the bomb had been transferred to Peking, Peng would suspect him immediately. Suspicion was as good as execution. He tried to stifle his fear.

Lu Sing Kai appeared not to notice. "Does the tracker know the hand of the launcher?"

"Peng learned it from his agents in Russia."

"Of which he has many," Lu Sing Kai supplied.

Wong regained his composure. "Very little that goes on in Russia escapes Peng," he asserted.

"I am certain of that." Lu Sing Kai fixed his eyes on his

friend. "But would the Americans know it was a weapon? Wouldn't they more likely believe it to be a scientific satellite?"

"It might take a few days but they would inspect it."

"They have the means?"

"They've already flight-tested a secret Earth-to-orbit plane," Wong explained.

"Then why could they not shoot down the satellite?"

"I'm not certain." Wong floundered with the question. "Perhaps it carries counter-missiles," he suggested.

"Ah, of course."

"They have other means, given time."

"An inventive people," Lu Sing Kai observed.

Wong asked plaintively, "What can be done?"

"There's very little."

"Just wait?"

"And listen," Lu Sing Kai counseled. "Perhaps a way will suggest itself."

Lu Sing Kai remained seated in the small room long after his nocturnal visitor had departed. Gazing through the window, he watched a linden tree sway against the stars. He'd often admired the graceful movement; tonight, his mind was elsewhere.

Once he stirred as a servant noiselessly glided in to light a brass brazier. Moving closer, Lu Sing Kai held his veined hands over the glowing coals. Although it was summer, the warmth felt good. An old man sitting by the fire, he ruminated, but ah, the years were good. He closed his eyes in recollection.

The end of life had appeared clouded in eternity when viewed from the vantage point of youth. How slowly the years had flowed then, and how pleasantly; and now, how quickly. Time was geometrical in its passage. How many years since he'd obtained a degree in physics from the University of Paris? Frederick Joliot-Curie had been his mentor. Later he'd worked at Cambridge University, and still later at the California Institute of Technology, where he had been awarded his doctorate. He'd also worked as a

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research associate at the University of California before returning to China.

I am Chinese, yet not Chinese, he reflected, and felt no sadness in the realization. He'd loved France, he'd loved America, and he'd been fascinated during the few months he'd worked with Russian scientists at Dubna. Now this world he loved trembled on the brink of disaster.

Did America know the satellite was a bomb? If America knew, America would find an answer; he felt certain of that. Americans were quite ingenious at solving such things. But what lay behind the bomb? That was the crux. Certainly Trofimuk must know that nuclear war could end only in mutual destruction. Why then had he launched it? And why was comrade Peng so certain that the nuclear ashes would not touch China? It was all quite puzzling. Unless, of course, there was something Wong hadn't told him.

Watching the bamboo sway across the window, his mind groped for the missing piece. China, Russia and the United States were the three pillars of the world, represented by comrades Peng, Chernychev and the President. Trofimuk? Trofimuk was a pawn. He felt certain of that, for only a pawn would act in a game in which he could but lose. Who then moved the pawn? Not comrade Chernychev, certainly. Peng? It had to be Peng.

Peng Yi was the pawn master!

The first light of day was coming through the windows when he stirred again. Rising, he hobbled across the room. In his youth, time had been a gently-flowing river; now it moved swiftly as a hawk. Yet time itself was but a medium in which action occurred, a setting. And Peng? Peng Yi swam against the tide of history.

Lu Sing Kai found comfort in the thought.

Time: 10:30 A.M., 8 July 1973.

Place: The White House.

EN ROUTE TO THE White House, General James Guyer, Air Force Chief of Staff, felt distinctly apprehensive. *Why?* The President had phoned him personally—unprecedented, in his case—instructing him to come to the Cabinet Room immediately. His tone had been crisp, uninformative, but Guyer had scant doubt but that it related to the loss of the XMSV-1. He glanced at his watch. Scarcely a handful of minutes had elapsed since the President's call.

The ride gave him a few moments in which to think. The morning papers had headlined the loss of the XMSV-1. —*“apparently by explosion during a high altitude flight test above the Mojave Desert”*—according to wire reports. Walker and Vollmer were listed as dead. The wreckage had not been recovered. No hint was given of the astroplane's orbital capability. An old picture dug from the files showed Walker standing alongside a high altitude research plane at Edwards Air Force Base.

Guyer had searched through the paper, relieved to find the earlier reports of the strange satellite missing. *Thank God for that,* he thought fervently. The merest hint of its true nature could start a panic. His attention returned to the President. Either Hammit or McCloud had gotten to him. Guyer felt thankful for that; he'd gone as far as he could alone.

An alert-eyed young man met Guyer at the back door of the White House and led him to the Cabinet Room by a circuitous route to avoid the press. The President sat with half a dozen men at a long table. He was tall and somewhat stooped, with sparse gray hair and dark eyes buried behind bushy brows. His deeply-lined face held a haggard look.

“Good morning, Jim,” he greeted informally. “I thought you'd better sit with us for first-hand information.”

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"Thank you, Mr. President." A glance told him the conference was akin to a junior version of a meeting of the National Security Council—most of the key men were present. This, he knew, was ExComm, the Executive Committee: a name that stemmed from the day when President Kennedy had sat with just such a committee during the Cuban crisis, a decade before. Now they were eyeball-to-eyeball with nuclear death once again.

Aware of Secretary McCloud's cold glance, he sat across from Admiral Philip Massey, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs. He'd known Massey was back, of course. He'd been alerted to the Admiral's return early that morning, but had been unable to contact him. The Admiral's eyes met his in brief understanding. The littered ash trays and tired faces plainly told where Massey had been since his arrival.

Guyer looked around as he settled back. The President was flanked by Secretary of State Clayton Kimball and Ed Palmer, his security aide. CIA Director Martin Sankler, a dark, gaunt man of around fifty with strangely empty eyes, sat across from Dr. Darius Thornhill, the President's science advisor. Defense Secretary McCloud and Admiral Massey completed the picture. Guyer noted that only the Treasury Secretary and Attorney General were missing from the group appointed to consider the life or death decisions when the chips were down. The reflection gave him a sense of history.

The President said restrainedly, "You appear to have handed us a bombshell, Jim."

"I believe it's that, sir," Guyer agreed.

"I'll fill you in." The President nodded toward Secretary Kimball and continued, "Clayton talked with the Russian ambassador the first thing this morning. Vadin denies emphatically that Russia has launched anything into orbit during the last week, much less a nuclear bomb. We didn't say bomb, of course, but he caught the implication. Nor did we mention the astroplane, but I don't believe it would have made much difference. Vadin was emphatic."

"Shocked," Secretary Kimball remarked. "He cited the space treaty."

"Ah, yes, the treaty." The President smiled slightly and

looked at Guyer. "You appear equally certain that such a warhead is in orbit?" He made it a question.

"Yes, sir," he answered positively.

"Vadin's denial means nothing in my language," CIA Director Sankler broke in. "Neither does the space treaty. We should forget that scrap of paper. I seem to recall that the Japanese ambassador was negotiating for peace at the moment Pearl Harbor was being bombed." His voice held a harsh quality that jarred Guyer.

"We've found Vadin trustworthy in the past," Kimball retorted. He looked gray and harassed.

"We've gone over all that," the President brusquely interrupted. "Personally, I'm inclined to trust Vadin, and Chernychev too, but we have too much at stake to depend on trust. We have to know. We have to make a fast decision."

"Mr. President, we can't risk wrecking the peace conference," Kimball declared. His face held a pleading look. "You and I . . . the Nation has waited too long for that. What we do here today will shape history."

"I'm quite aware of that, Clayton."

"We have absolutely no proof that it is a warhead," McCloud interjected.

"At least you admit there's something up there," CIA Director Sankler observed acidly.

"Certainly," McCloud snapped, "but does that make it a warhead? That's loose thinking."

The President rapped the table and said, "It's not just the bomb." He paused, eyeing Guyer before he continued, "The Chinese are massing at a number of key points along the border. We've had estimates of as many as forty divisions on the move. They've also stepped up air activity around Formosa. I can't see how this relates to the satellite, but it perturbs me all the same."

"I don't believe the two are related," declared Kimball.

"We can't afford to guess."

"China undoubtedly has traced the satellite," McCloud observed. "Their moves could be precautionary."

The President asked sharply, "Would they expect it to be nuclear?"

"They're certainly aware of Anflov's bomb," said Ed Palmer, the security aide.

"We're missing a point," the President shot back. "Russia has launched dozens of major satellites, but these are the first massive troop movements China has made in several years. Why this time? China didn't respond that way to other launchings."

"We don't know that it is in response to a launching," Kimball argued.

"But it could be; that's the whole point."

McCloud leaned toward the President. "We're conjecturing a nuclear warhead and we're conjecturing Chinese moves in response to it. We seem to be building a house of cards. If we arrive at a fixed assumption, we automatically muster the rationale to support it."

"We have not arrived at a fixed assumption," the President admonished.

"I feel we're moving rapidly in that direction," McCloud answered.

"We have to explore," Admiral Massey interjected. "If necessary, we have to stack the cards in our favor."

"Are you talking about the short run or the long run?" asked Kimball. "What we do—what best serves us—depends on our length of vision."

Massey raised his head. The eyes beneath the shaggy brows were hard and bright. "I'm talking about survival, pure and simple. You can't measure that on a yardstick."

The President looked at Guyer. When the silence came, he said, "We seem to have some disagreement."

"It's a confused picture," Guyer admitted.

"Yet you are certain that it is a nuclear bomb?"

Guyer suddenly realized this question lay behind the summons which had brought him to the White House. The President wanted to hear the answer from his own lips. "Yes, sir," he responded.

"Why?"

Guyer tersely related the last moments of the XMSV-1—the astroplane's approach, the pilot's and copilot's reports, the significance of the satellite's sudden shift in attitude. Speaking, the stark drama of what had occurred high in

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orbital space above the Western Hemisphere came alive in his mind. He saw exactly what must have happened and the conviction shaped his words. He related the views of Major Sam Kirby, the astronaut command pilot who'd been manning the phones; and, finally, General Lampert's summation. Finished, he sat back waiting.

"That doesn't make it a nuclear warhead," Kimball murmured.

"Not that I can see," McCloud added.

Guyer said, "There'd be no sense in arming a scientific payload."

"We don't know how the XMSV-1 was destroyed," McCloud stated.

"I'm convinced it was by a missile," Guyer replied.

"We have to determine that point," the President cut in.

"Determine it how?" asked Kimball.

"Mr. President?" Guyer looked at the man who well could be holding the destiny of the world in his hand.

"Go ahead, Jim."

"General Lampert hopes to have the XMSV-2 spaceborne within five days, less now." Guyer saw the startled look in McCloud's eyes.

"If we have five days," Admiral Massey cut in.

Guyer said, "It's the best we can do, Phil."

"Inspect the missile, is that it?" the President asked.

"That's our intention, sir."

"How about the satellite's counter-missiles?"

"We're equipping the XMSV-2 with rockets," Guyer admitted.

"I wasn't informed of that," snapped McCloud. Guyer didn't answer him.

"Is that sufficient?" asked the President.

"Yes, sir," Guyer answered. "Walker—Major Walker, the astronaut command pilot—moved to within four hundred yards of the satellite before he was attacked. We could knock it out of the sky at many times that range."

Clayton Kimball caught the President's eye and protested, "We can't shoot it down without positive knowledge that it is a warhead. Do that and the peace talks are down the drain."

"Jim was talking about inspecting the bomb, not shooting it down unless attacked," the President said. He looked at Guyer. "Am I right?"

"That's the general idea," Guyer agreed.

"Inspect it, how?" the science advisor asked quizzically.

"Is that a problem, Darius?" The President looked at Thornhill.

"If it's nuclear and the pile's passive, yes." Thornhill nodded, blinking owlishly through his heavy spectacles. "I can't see how you can do it if you can't approach closer than four hundred yards."

"I believe we can," Guyer observed.

"How?"

He related what Lampert had told him about the neutron gun. When he finished, Thornhill shook his head. "Who thought up that one?"

"The Air Force think factory," Guyer replied.

Thornhill pursed his lips, his face contemplative. Finally he said, "The theory's sound but the range is too far. You'd have to approach closer than four hundred yards—much closer."

"Couldn't they direct it along a tight beam—say a laser beam?" asked Guyer.

"Perhaps; given a long period of research . . ." Thornhill was frankly dubious.

"I don't believe they're shooting in the blind," Guyer contended.

The President ordered, "You'd better get in touch with those people, Darius."

"Yes, sir." Thornhill looked disconcerted.

"That brings up another problem," Ed Palmer slowly observed.

"What's that?" The President glanced sharply at his security aide.

"Suppose we do challenge Chernychev, give him an ultimatum? What can he do about the bomb? He can't recall it."

"He'd know he'd damned well better not drop it," Sankler of the CIA declared.

"We'd knock it down for him," Admiral Massey suggested. "We could tell him that."

"That's what we couldn't do," McCloud rebutted, "not unless we were willing to reveal our orbital capabilities."

Massey shot back, "I thought you didn't believe in the bomb?"

McCloud flushed. "I'm trying to look at it from all viewpoints."

"How would we handle it?" The President looked inquiringly at Guyer.

"We could knock it down without any announcement," he replied. "They'd never know what happened."

In the brief silence that followed, Admiral Massey prompted, "We still haven't resolved our next move, Mr. President."

"We're trying, Phil."

"This inspection plan is fine," Massey continued, "But do we have five days? I believe we have to act as if we had five minutes."

"They haven't dropped it yet," McCloud observed dryly.

"That's what puzzles me," Massey exclaimed. "What's holding them up?"

"What do you recommend?" The President's tone was prodding.

"Just what I've been recommending all morning," Massey replied. His voice was sharp. "I'd put all of our forces on an immediate alert. I'd reinforce our satellite surveillance with supersonic over-flights of Russia and China; and finally I'd get Chernychev on the hot line. I'd tell him that one beep out of that baby up there and we'll take it as the go signal on our part. I don't believe we have time to wait. This afternoon may be too late."

"Amen," the CIA director agreed.

In that moment Guyer felt proud of Phil Massey. He was a fighter, every inch, and when fighting he didn't stand on protocol; he laid it on the line. Defense Secretary McCloud didn't phase him; neither did the President. Massey had said, in effect, the very things Guyer had wanted to say.

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Kimball broke the silence. "Those moves could end any hope for peace," he protested.

"Peace!" Massey shook his head grimly. "What peace?"

"I'm opposed," McCloud protested in a tight, strident voice.

"I'm for it," the CIA man declared. "The sooner we move, the better."

"I haven't wanted to rock the boat." The President spoke soberly and all eyes turned to him. "Lord knows I've prayed for peace; I've fought for it all the way, and I've believed in Chernychev's sincerity. . . ."

Massey cleared his throat and quietly said, "Perhaps it's not Chernychev. Perhaps it's Trofimuk."

"A good reason for getting on the hot line," the CIA man broke in. "It would be interesting to see who answers the phone." No one laughed.

A taut silence built up and caught them in its tension. It grew until the President said, "We've explored as far as we can explore. My mind is made up."

"We go on alert?" someone asked.

"We have no other choice."

"Condition Red . . . Alert One?" asked Massey.

"Red Alert One," the President affirmed. Guyer exhaled slowly, feeling the tension drain from his body. Thanks to him, several of the key units already unofficially were at "go" readiness; Red Alert One would activate every strike unit in the nation. Polaris submarines, SAC bombers, ICBM crews—every hand would be poised, ready, awaiting only the President's final coded message.

Kimball asked in an anxious voice, "Then we are surrendering all hopes for peace?"

"This is not of our making," the President answered sternly. "Our offer still stands."

"If Chairman Chernychev is sincere—and I believe that—he could only view this as a massive threat," Kimball persisted. "Could he attend the conference under those conditions?"

The President started to speak, and hesitated. The brief flash of anger that had leaped into his eyes vanished and a pensive look came into his face. Again a silence pervaded the room. Guyer shifted uncomfortably and shot a quick

glance at Massey, fearful that the President was about to change his mind. *"Dear God, not now,"* he prayed quietly.

"He has no choice," the President replied finally. "If he wants peace, he will come."

"Could he stand before the world and talk peace while looking down the barrel of a gun?" asked Kimball. "Could we?"

"Aren't we looking down the barrel of a gun?" asked Massey brusquely.

"We don't know that," Kimball argued.

Guyer felt a sudden sympathy for the Secretary of State, regardless of how mistaken he thought him to be. Kimball's job wasn't war, but peace; he'd spent years working patiently at it, all through the dark days when Anfilov had straddled Russia, mocking the United States as both a war-monger and a paper tiger. Kimball had fought for peace even while Anfilov developed the fearful orbital warhead by which he hoped to conquer the world. Not conquer it; destroy it, Guyer mentally corrected. Anfilov would have annihilated the West, like blotting ants from a table, regardless of the consequences. Then Anfilov was gone, replaced by Chernychev, and Kimball's hopes had blossomed anew. Now this! Yes, he could feel sympathy for the Secretary of State.

The President's eyes fixed Kimball intently. "We have no choice, Clayton."

"Are we allowing ourselves a choice?"

"Can you suggest an alternative—an acceptable one that will protect the Nation until this issue is resolved?" asked the President.

Kimball remained silent.

The CIA director said abruptly, "Vadin would have alerted Chernychev by now."

"So?" the President asked softly.

"He'll have his answers ready."

"Perhaps."

Guyer watched as the President rose and went to a battery of multicolored phones. Selecting one, he held the receiver to his ear. Guyer knew it must be a direct line since he didn't dial. The President waited several seconds,

then spoke quickly but quietly into the mouthpiece. Finished, he replaced the instrument in its cradle and remained waiting.

No one spoke. Guyer glanced around the table. McCloud's face held an angry look; Philip Massey's was grim; Secretary Kimball appeared worried. Darius Thornhill and Ed Palmer, the President's security aide, were watching the man standing by the telephone curiously. Finally he looked at Martin Sankler. The CIA director's face was absolutely blank; it showed nothing at all. Guyer thought he'd hate to play poker with him.

Seconds later the telephone rang and the President answered it. He listened quietly, then said, "Yes, this is the President. Those are my orders. There was no mistake." Replacing the phone, he turned to the men at the table. "The Nation is on Red Alert One," he said quietly.

"God help us," someone whispered.

The President straightened suddenly and said to no one in particular, "Now I will call Chairman Chernychev."

An anxious and harassed General Guyer left the White House three hours later. The intervening time had been tumultuous; that was the only word that came to mind to describe it.

Chairman Chernychev categorically had denied that Russia had launched any large payload into orbit within the last week. He'd been adamant on that point. The President had been careful not to call it a nuclear warhead; nevertheless, his meaning was clear.

Chernychev had grasped the implication. He said that Russia also had tracked the new satellite, and had recorded it as a United States launch. His military chiefs, Chernychev stated, were perturbed over the nature of it. He certainly hoped there was no violation of the space treaty. A bomb in orbit was unthinkable.

There had been more of the same. The President had not issued an ultimatum, but had warned that this Nation was prepared to take immediate action should the satellite commence reentry in the Western Hemisphere. His words left scant doubt but that the United States was on full

alert. Chernychev declared that Russia also was watching the satellite—for the same purpose. He was emphatic on that point. He indicated that Russia's armed forces were ready for any eventuality.

Following the call, the conference began anew.

CIA Director Martin Sankler started bluntly, "I think you should have told Chernychev that the satellite's booster was tracked from its launch site on Novaya Zemlya. I'd like to see him weasel out of that." His voice was critical.

"We're trying to keep the astroplane secret," McCloud snapped.

Sankler studied him. "Couldn't we have assigned the sighting to an MOL? They're certainly aware of our manned orbital labs."

The President regarded the CIA chief thoughtfully. "We've gone as far as the situation warrants, Martin. We'll have to see what develops."

"At least we know Chernychev is a liar," Ed Palmer declared.

"Because he denied it?" The President scrutinized Palmer quizzically.

"We know it's up there, they know it's up there, and it isn't ours," Palmer answered.

"I've considered that."

"What other answer is there?"

"I'm not ready to make a blanket indictment," the President returned curtly. "There's too much we don't know."

"We have to be hard-headed," Sankler commented.

"I believe that's the easy way out," the President retorted. "It's easy to be hard-headed with the power we hold at our fingertips, but I'm cognizant that Chernychev holds similar power. We've summoned quite an array of logic to support a tough position, even an ultimatum, and yet one small piece is missing. Can we plunge ahead until we know for certain? You know and I know that any exchange of nuclear weapons means mutual destruction. I owe the Nation better than that, Martin."

Sankler lifted his head. "I believe Chernychev would back down in any real confrontation."

"But you don't know, do you?"

"Khrushchev did when we put it to him during the Cuban ruckus."

"Chernychev isn't Khrushchev, Martin."

"The situation is analogous. I believe their response would follow a pattern."

"But we don't know?"

"No," Sankler admitted reluctantly.

"So there we have it." The President gazed around the table, his face contemplative. "Not too many years ago one of my predecessors was faced with a similar situation—worse, because he knew that Soviet missiles actually were in Cuba; he had no doubts. His advisors urged an immediate all-out attack on Cuba, even nuclear devastation. But instead he temporized, if that is the word, and in the end, he won. Today, we are still here; we are here because he didn't panic. I hope in some future day my successors can say the same of me."

Listening, Guyer saw the President in a new perspective, one that was but dimly related to the political image created by cartoonists and columnists. He was a man deeply dedicated to his responsibility, not only to the Nation but to the world. He wished others could see the President as he was seeing him now. Unfortunately, the moment couldn't be projected beyond the confines of the room.

The President ceased speaking and glanced slowly around the table.

McCloud broke the brief silence. "I believe we've gone as far as it's possible to go," he said.

"For the time being," Sankler amended.

The President nodded and looked at Guyer. "You're quiet, Jim."

"Thoughtful, sir." Guyer returned his gaze. "I agree with Secretary McCloud. I believe we've gone as far as we can with what we know."

"Phil?" The President switched his eyes to Admiral Massey.

"I feel better knowing that we're at Red Alert One," Admiral Massey responded. "At the same time, I'd regard the commencement of reentry, if within this hemisphere, as an automatic go signal. We can't temporize then."

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"Chairman Chernychev is aware of that."

"I hope he is, sir."

The President and Secretary Kimball left the room briefly to talk with several Congressional leaders who had been alerted to the situation. Returning, the President briefed the committee on their reactions.

Wispy Casper Chappell, the House majority leader, had insisted that an admission that the Nation was in a state of Red Alert One could result in a public outcry that would doom the peace conference and perhaps result in domestic panic. He urged that when news of the alert became public—rumors already were flying—it be announced as a gigantic readiness exercise of the Nation's armed forces. Secretary Kimball strongly supported that view. The President had acquiesced.

"But only for the time being," he warned. He stated that if war appeared inevitable, the American people would have to know. He was less explanatory about the reaction of Senate majority leader Burton Townsend. The Senator was a super hawk.

"Burton wants the fireworks," the President said only.

Before Guyer left, Attorney General Carlton Wood, Treasury Secretary Paul Ulrich, and several additional high government officials had appeared in the smoky Cabinet Room. A suddenly swollen group of reporters and columnists in the west wing hammered questions at the President's harassed press secretary. Guyer was grateful to escape.

Back at his office, he called General Lampert on the scrambler phone. Lampert came on immediately. Guyer tersely related that part of the conference which concerned Lampert's activities and asked, "Will you make it in four days?"

"Or sooner," Lampert assured him.

"I'm worried that you'll have to fly her untested," Guyer confided. "Frankly, that gives me gray hairs."

"Sam's combing her over, inch by inch, Jim."

"If he has any doubts . . ." Guyer left the thought hanging, knowing he was wasting his breath. If Sam Kirby had to fly her in four days, he'd do it. Guyer drew some small comfort in the knowledge that Kirby, like all Air Force astronaut command pilots, was an engineer; Kirby

held two degrees. If anyone could assess the astroplane's flight-readiness, Kirby was the man. Against that, Guyer's mind registered the X factor, the unpredictable that no amount of human ingenuity ever quite erased. The X factor was compounded of the unforeseen, human error, the failure of some two-bit part. . . . The prospects were endless.

As if sensing his perturbation, Lampert said, "We can't invite trouble, Jim."

"I'm trying to assess," he objected.

"Can we assess anything, at this state?"

"Probably not." He told Lampert of Thornhill's skepticism over the neutron gun. "He frankly doesn't believe it'll work at the range Sam will have to keep," he explained.

"It'll work."

"Do we really know the distance at which the satellite can detect the plane?" Guyer countered. "Do we know it's rocket range?"

"Only what we learned from Walker."

"That point worries me, Joe."

"We'll be pretty maneuverable," Lampert reminded.

"It's still risky."

"What isn't, Jim?"

He's right, Guyer thought; everything was risky. The only sensible course was to assess the risk in relation to the stakes. Viewed in that light, even gigantic risks diminished in stature. He had to orient his thinking to the goal, as Lampert was doing. He said, "I'd have the labs work out a number of orbits. We don't know when you might have to rendezvous."

"They're working on that now," Lampert declared.

"Good." Guyer felt a stab of satisfaction. Joe Lampert was on the ball, ahead of him at every step. He wondered again how he'd reached the top and Lampert hadn't. *Except that he's an action man*, he reflected. *Joe belongs in the field, not shuffling paper.*

Lampert said, "We're working on a new idea."

"What is it?"

"I'd rather not say, not even over the scrambler phone, Jim, but it could offer a final solution."

"Final solution?" Guyer murmured. He wanted to press

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Lampert but held back. Lampert had told him all he could. Instead, he asked, "Is there anything I can do from this end?"

"You might have to go to the President when the time comes," Lampert suggested.

"I'll do that." Guyer hesitated, then took another step that plunged him beyond the bounds of his authority. "If by any chance you can't get me, call Phil Massey direct. If you can't contact Massey, call the President. Those are orders."

"I'll do that, but I hope to God I don't have to," Lampert responded fervently.

Guyer hung up, staring for a long moment at the phone. *The Final Solution* . . . The words held a ring that sent a chill through his body. Grappling with the problem, he wondered if it could have anything to do with the neutron gun. No, that wasn't it. What then? He closed his eyes, visualizing how it would be in space as Sam Kirby maneuvered the astrophane toward the satellite. What could he do, what could he possibly do?

The Final Solution . . . Suddenly it came to him what Lampert had proposed. Good God! His hand began to tremble and he fought to control it. It was blindingly clear, perhaps simple. And final, he agreed. Would the President buy that? Yes, the President would buy it—if the situation grew grim enough.

"*I hope to God I don't have to.*" Guyer echoed Lampert's words, thankful that the decision wouldn't be his to make. All at once, more clearly than ever before, he understood what it meant to occupy the seat in the White House. Did Kimball or McCloud or Martin Sankler understand that? Did Phil Massey? Perhaps Massey, he thought; Massey was of the same texture.

All at once Guyer felt humble. Walking to the window, he looked out. *Dear God*, he prayed, *don't let it happen.*

After a while he returned to his desk and went to work.

Time: 1700 hours (GMT), 8 July 1973.

Place: Aboard nuclear submarine Batfish in the Bering Sea.

RADIOMAN LLOYD PARMAN, on watch in the radio shack, made a secret bet with himself on how long it would take the nuclear submarine *Batfish* to reach Seattle. The *Batfish* had just completed a fast run across the top of the world under the Arctic ice, and only a few hours before had emerged through the narrow Bering Strait into the shallow Bering Sea, headed for its new assignment as a unit of Pacific Fleet Submarines.

Parman mentally resurrected the map he'd seen in the navigation room. Alaska lay to the east, the jutting bulk of Asia's Chukchi Peninsula to the west. Their present heading would take them past St. Lawrence Island, east of the Pribilofs and through the Aleutian chain. Then they'd turn easterly, he reflected. Five days? Six? It all depended on the Old Man.

Thinking of Seattle, Parman grinned happily. By reputation, it was a good liberty town, one he'd never seen. Something new, something strange, he thought, and a tingle ran through his lanky body.

At that precise moment the secret dispatch came.

Parman read it and goggled; a tightness filled his throat. Suddenly Seattle seemed far away. He murmured a "damn" and sprang to action. Within thirty seconds he had the dispatch in the hands of Commander Kent Morley, the ship's captain, who at the moment was conning the *Batfish* through shallow water laden with rafted ice.

Morley glanced at the dispatch. "Good Lord, why?" he muttered. Following a second of startlement, he barked an order to the helmsman. Lieutenant Commander Carter Winn, his tall, rail-thin executive officer, arched his eyes inquiringly, holding back the question on his lips. Morley waited silently while the *Batfish* came about. When it once again

was pointed toward the mouth of Bering Strait, he handed the message to Winn.

The executive officer scanned it and glanced up, his eyes puzzled. "Proceed with all speed to Latitude 68 North, Longitude 172 West?"

"And await further orders," Morley added.

Winn said wonderingly, "That places us near the edge of the permanent ice pack."

"It does."

"In Russian waters." Winn pursed his lips in a silent whistle.

"Not technically," Morley contradicted. "We're still this side of the International Dateline."

"No, not technically." The executive officer sucked at his lip. "But if we were going to be ordered to return to the East Coast we wouldn't . . ." He fell silent, searching his mind.

"It's something else," Morley conjectured. If they were going to be ordered to return across the ice cap, their course would be easterly along the Alaskan coast toward Point Barrow and the deep Barrow Sea Valley that led to the Western Arctic Basin. Whatever the Navy had in mind, returning across the pole wasn't it.

Suddenly Morley became aware of the curious scrutiny of the crewmen around him. No word was spoken—the crew was too well-trained for that—but an oppressive uncertainty had gathered in the small quarters. Sighing, he stepped to the mike on the ship's public address system.

"Attention, all hands," he called. "This is the Captain speaking. We are ordered to return to Arctic waters. That is all I can tell you for now." A murmur rose and as quickly died. He turned to glance quickly at Lieutenant Bill Taylor, his navigation officer. The latter's face was forcedly expressionless. But, of course, his wife was to meet him in Seattle, Morley recalled. Bill had several weeks leave coming and had been counting on it. He looked back at Winn, and then at the plotting board.

Speeding northward through the shallow water, Morley felt a fierce pride in his crew. The run under the Arctic ice had been tricky, if not dangerous, and everyone had

been planning the first liberty in Seattle; instead, they were headed back toward the ice pack. But if any of the men were dismayed, none showed it.

Along with his sense of pride, Morley experienced a gnawing anxiety. Normally the nuclear submarines ran submerged throughout their entire missions, but the narrow, shallow, radar-scanned strait prohibited that. At times, at least, he'd have to run with the periscope up, and with the sail and perhaps the entire upper hull visible. He didn't like it, but had no choice.

He glanced at the clock. Greenwich time was approaching 1800 hours, but above them the approaches to the strait lay in the dawn. They'd come through in the darkness; now they'd be returning in the early morning light.

"Ice ahead," Chief Kelsey called from the sonar room. He followed with the range and bearing. Morley ordered a change in course, slackening speed to ten knots. Although it was summer, the polar ice that had pushed southward against the funnel of the strait in winter had remained as the ice cap receded; broken into great floating blocks, it made passage of the strait extremely hazardous.

Lem Hanson, a sonar operator, brought a pot of black coffee from the galley. "Thought you might like some, Captain," he said.

"Thanks, Lem." Morley returned gratefully. Pouring a cup, he sipped it slowly while listening to the reports flow in from the steering and diving center, the sonar room and engine rooms. The ship was alive, pulsing around him; Morley had never felt it more keenly than at this moment. It felt as if it were part of his flesh and blood. In truth, he knew it as well as he knew his wife, he thought.

Morley furrowed his brow. There were times when he didn't see his wife for long months on end, times when she seemed scarcely more than a stranger; but the ship, never. At every instant he knew exactly what was happening in the maneuvering room, the attack center, the reactor room, the missile control center—knew, just as if his physical presence was there in those rooms. From time to time he lived with his wife and played with his children; but he lived

with the ship night and day, even during the occasional months he spent ashore.

"A helluva life," Morley grunted to himself, but he knew he'd never change it, even if he could. No true submariner would; the eerie world beneath the sea was a lover who charmed all men. His own father had been hooked the same way. On the mantel of the house where Morley grew up was a stainless steel model of the *Tang*, a diesel submarine built at Mare Island during the early days of World War II. His father had been a junior officer aboard her. The *Tang* had sunk twenty-four vessels before being destroyed by one of her own torpedoes gone wild in the Formosa Straits. Morley sighed heavily.

But why were they returning to the Arctic North? Failing to find an answer, he suppressed the question and returned his attention to the ship. Occasionally he exchanged brief words with his executive officer, but mostly he was silent.

Lieutenant Taylor, the navigator, reported King Island passing abeam. The island lay south of the mouth of the strait. Formed as an eight hundred-foot high basalt dome with an area of less than one square mile, it contained an Eskimo village of somewhat over a hundred people. Morley wondered if they ever suspected the giant nuclear submarines that from time to time slipped past almost under their noses. Perhaps Russian submarines also, he reflected. Intelligence had reported several Red submarine bases along the shores of the East Siberian, Laptev and Barents seas. He regretted being unable to raise the scope.

Chief Kelsey in sonar reported more ice; at the same time the water began shoaling rapidly. The fathometer showed sixty feet of water under the keel, dropping to fifty, then forty, and finally thirty-five feet. As the cushion of safety narrowed beneath them, Morley reluctantly ordered speed slackened, then "Periscope up!"

He heard the hiss of high-pressure oil as a hydraulic piston lifted the port periscope from its seating. The cylinder rose slowly through the murky water until finally the lens rode just above the surface. Grasping the hand grips, Morley turned them as he peered through the eyepiece.

He scanned the surface quickly. The early morning sun

was unusually bright, the sea clear and calm. Chunks of rafted ice gleamed like great diamonds against the blue, and here and there he spotted scatterings of "brash," finely-broken ice fragments that lay like shuffled glass panes on the surface. He moved the scope to bring the rugged features of King Island into the cross hairs, glimpsing what appeared to be platform houses supported on poles, but he couldn't be certain. All in all the rock was gray, featureless, lonely against the sea.

Glancing up from the scope, he ordered the *Batfish* on a more easterly course that would take them into deeper water.

The executive officer took a turn on the scope. "Wonderful visibility," he remarked wryly. Morley sensed the seriousness underlying his words and knew exactly what he meant. Ninety percent of the time this part of the world was blanketed by fog, swirling mists or rain, but this morning the sun shone as if they were cruising along the Southern California coast. He was thinking about it when a radioman rushed in and thrust a message into his hands. The man's face was tight with excitement.

Morley glanced at the message and caught his breath sharply, yet somehow wasn't surprised. He sensed the executive officer's curiosity and said, "Condition Red Alert One."

"Red Alert One?" Winn echoed.

"Now we know," he answered grimly. Stepping to the public address system, he passed the word to the crew. A total silence followed the announcement, broken when somebody huskily murmured "Christ!" An instant later the general alarm sounded, ringing hollowly throughout the ship.

Morley discussed the matter briefly with Winn and Bill Taylor, the navigator. Following the initial shock, he felt calm and steady. "We'll have to push through the strait as rapidly as possible," he warned.

"We're going to be running sail up, perhaps hull up past the *Diomedes*," Taylor declared. His eyes were questioning.

"There's no help for that."

"And under a bright sun," Winn grunted sourly. "We have no choice."

"None whatever," Morley agreed.

"We might as well make a beeline instead of fishing around for deep water," Taylor suggested. "We could save considerable time."

Morley started to answer when radar reported a ship locked against the land profile some miles to the north-east. He sprang to the periscope and brought it to bear on the vessel. Under the bright sun, he discerned its lines—hump-bowed, squat, ungainly. It resembled the whalers so common in northern waters. No flag was visible. It could be American, or Russian. He looked at the fathometer. The water wasn't deep, but deep enough. "Flood negative!" he directed Lieutenant Karsh, the Officer of the Deck.

"Flood negative!" Karsh bellowed.

"Dive; dive." The diving officer's voice rang through the speakers and a klaxon horn burped twice. Morley felt the deck tilt slightly as the negative tank was vented and tons of seawater poured into it. The water swirled around the scope, finally obliterating his vision altogether.

"Secure flooding," the diving officer called. "Steady at eighty feet."

"Periscope down," Morley instructed.

"Periscope down," Lieutenant Karsh repeated to the crewman at his left.

The executive officer regarded the captain speculatively. "Fishing vessel?" he asked.

"Looked like a whaler," Morley answered.

"But you don't believe it, eh?"

"I wouldn't swear to it." Morley rubbed his chin reflectively. Russian radars scanned the strait constantly and he had scant doubt but that surface vessels were equally busy probing the depths. In all likelihood the vessel he'd observed possessed sonar gear fully as good as that of the *Batfish*. In addition, he knew that the approaches to the strait were sown with both active and passive listening devices. Totaled, it meant that Russia would know in advance that one American nuclear submarine was preparing to run the narrow and shallow strait. The thought was discomfiting.

His suspicions were confirmed in his mind a moment later when sonar reported the vessel coming about. Seconds later Chief Kelsey's voice rang through the speaker, "She's picking up speed, heading for the strait." He called out the vessel's course, speed and bearing.

Morley glanced at the fathometer and saw that the water had deepened; they'd reached the eastern trough that extended almost to the Diomed Islands, which lay at almost the narrowest part of the strait. "Full speed ahead," he ordered crisply.

"Ay, aye, sir," Karsh answered. He raised his voice: "Full speed ahead."

"Kelsey, keep a sharp lookout," Morley called in the speaker.

"Sharp does it, Captain," Chief Kelsey called back. His voice was high with cheer.

"How does she look?"

"The ship? She's starting to fall abeam, Captain. We'll slip past her easily."

"Report any change in course immediately," he instructed, knowing the command was wasted. Chief Kelsey was a man who took his job seriously.

Morley returned his eyes to the fathometer. The eastern trough gave them a full eighty feet of water under the keel. Like shooting through a greased tube, he reflected; everything was fine as long as the sides weren't burred. But that was sonar's job—to detect the ice or obstructions long before they could become dangerous. He wasn't worried; the *Batfish* had the best eyes in the world—eyes that looked down, around, ahead. And when they were under the ice the eyes looked straight up, profiling its thickness, telling him at every instant just how much leeway he had. No, he wasn't worried one damned bit.

Listening to the hum of the ship, he felt a sense of well-being, even though the most dangerous hours lay ahead. Aside from her sister ships, nothing afloat or submerged could touch the *Batfish*. He felt a stab of pride. Over 350 feet long and displacing some 4,600 tons, she represented the most powerful single weapon the Nation possessed. Although primarily designed for nuclear attack against targets

thousands of miles away, she also carried torpedoes for her own defense—a factor that had weighed in his mind since the onset of Red Alert One.

During the northward run toward the mouth of the strait, Morley found time to reflect on the possible significance of the alert. Probably the Thule radio had picked up bogus reflections from the moon again, or the Russians had been caught over-flying Alaska. Any number of things could add up to Red Alert One. And yet, this wasn't a false alarm; something in his subconscious told him that.

Morley didn't consider himself a political creature, yet he knew that he was far better versed in international politics than most men; the captain of a nuclear submarine had to be. God knows he'd read enough intelligence reports—reams of them—and endless analyses on international relations and the key people who were the driving forces behind them. Considering all factors, the world had never been closer to peace, real peace, than at the present. For a while, during which Anflov had clamped his iron grip over the Communist nations, the mushroom clouds had seemed very near. But now Chernychev held the reins, even though his grasp yet was tenuous. In Morley's view, Chernychev was a quite different man. His push for peace demonstrated that.

Then why Red Alert One? Certainly it was no exercise, not with the peace talks in the offing. An alert, even a bogus one, could cause grave damage to the U.S.-Russian relations at this stage. Russia most certainly would view it as intimidation. He couldn't imagine the President permitting the move unless the danger was extremely grave. *What danger?* Morley couldn't conceive of any possible explanation, and that perturbed him as much as anything else.

Several hours later the navigator reported the Diomed Islands lying twenty miles ahead. Shortly thereafter the water began shoaling rapidly and Morley slackened speed. At Chief Kelsey's report of ice ahead, he ordered a change in heading, waiting while a huge berg slipped past scarcely fifty yards off their port beam.

New bergs appeared. From Kelsey's calls, Morley thought

they must be springing from the sea. He tried to hug the east side of the trough but soon found himself running a weaving course. Sonar profiles showed the ice riding deeper in the water, with long, dangerous submerged shelves that in places interlocked. He reduced speed to ten knots, and finally to six. Keeping his eye on the fathometer, he listened to the reports from Chief Kelsey and Lieutenants Caldwell and White, the conning officers.

As the water shoaled, the *Batfish* slanted upward until her sail was barely below the surface. He raised the periscope, scanning the sea around him before turning it on the islands. Big Diomedé, Russian-owned, and Little Diomedé, part of Alaska, were separated by less than a mile, with the international dateline running between them; this was the boundary between the United States and Russia.

He moved the scope and Siberia loomed in his vision. Jutting into the strait, the rugged Chukchi Peninsula brought the Russian mainland to within scant miles of the North American Continent. Up there, somewhere, the *Batfish* would emerge as a blip on a radarscope. The knowledge was disquieting.

He brought the scope back to the Diomedes and scanned the granite slopes interestedly, recalling what little he knew of them. They had been discovered by the Danish explorer Vitus Bering in the 18th Century; a handful of Eskimo had come to inhabit them. He remembered that a priest lived there, his church high atop the granite bluffs. Morley decided it must be the loneliest parish on the face of the Earth.

He knew there had been a time when the inhabitants of the two small islands—less than a hundred people—had intermingled freely. In winter they walked between the two islands, or sledged back and forth across the ice; in summer they rode their kayaks through the cold water. But then the Russian government had intervened; now it was a crime to travel between the two lonely domes. Lovers, families and friends had been split; in time they would become strangers to one another, perhaps enemies. Morley wondered why such things had to be.

As the water continued to grow more shallow, he slanted

the *Batfish* upward again until her sail rode clear of the water. Morley turned back to the periscope again, marveling at the vast gulf in the technologies represented by the people who lived on the granite domes and those who resided in the belly of the steel fish. Yet which was better off? He wasn't certain.

He was turning away from the scope when his eye caught a small vessel rounding the end of Little Diomedé. He moved back to study it and realized it was larger than he'd first supposed, and faster—far too fast for a trawler. Low and fast! Suddenly his scalp prickled; something tied together in his mind and he recalled the old PT boats he'd seen years before.

Morley straightened with a jerk. "Ship off the port bow . . . coming fast!" As he spoke, he glanced at the fathometer; the *Batfish*, riding with her sail and part of her hull above the water, had less than twenty-five feet of water below the keel.

Radar reported the small boat at almost the same instant and began calling off its course, range and speed. At almost the same time Chief Kelsey picked it up on the long-range sonar and confirmed the data.

"We're not going anywhere," the executive officer called. His voice held a grim note. "We're locked to this slot until we pass the islands."

Morley realized Winn was right; they were locked to a narrow channel that restricted them to but slightly more than small corrections in heading. He thought of the torpedo tubes and knew they were useless. And no deck gun! Damn, the world was at peace, wasn't it? But if that were a Russian PT boat—if it meant business—the *Batfish* was a dead duck!

Watching the small boat cut across the water, he realized it was maneuvering to intercept the submarine from the port bow. "Bring her onto a head-on course," he ordered crisply.

"Come to port . . . ten degrees," Lieutenant Karsh rasped into the phones.

"Ten degrees port." The acknowledgment came like a sighing wind through the speakers. Morley felt the *Batfish*

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roll slightly as her bow came about and he moved the scope to keep the onrushing boat in the cross hairs. If she's Russian, she's going to get forty-six hundred tons of raw steel rammed down her throat, he thought savagely. As it grew larger, he saw the bow wave clearly.

"Aircraft!"

Morley jerked at the call, realizing it had come from radar. Before he could speak, the operator began feeding him the range, course and speed. "Six blips," he ended.

"Great, we'll break out the A.A. guns," someone cracked. A nervous laugh followed.

Morley debated the best course of action. It was useless to put the *Batfish* on the bottom; the thin shield of water would be no protection at all. At the same time, he had no room to maneuver.

"Aircraft coming in at six o'clock, five thousand feet and diving," the voice from radar chanted.

Morley swung the scope around and detected the aircraft almost immediately. He saw them clearly, the sun glinting on their swept-back wings. His spine tingled, he watched them diving in over the submarine's stern. *They're going to attack!* The thought flooded his mind with chilling certainty. Had the hot war erupted? A wave of helplessness engulfed him. He was caught on the surface, flat-footed and naked!

Gritting his teeth, he swung the scope back toward the small boat. Heeling over, the boat had changed course with an abruptness Morley didn't believe it was designed to withstand. The bow wave was flung out in a wide, sweeping arc. He was struggling to fathom the move when the first aircraft, hurtling in over the *Batfish's* stern, raced above the submarine and out over the bow. The harsh whine of jet engines transmitted through the metal hull filled his ears. He kept his eyes on the scope, following the plane while awaiting the crashing explosion he felt certain would come. "Dear God, is this it?" he whispered to himself.

All of a sudden he realized the boat and not the submarine was the target. As he watched, the swept-winged plane hurtled over the strange craft with but a few feet to spare. The boat heeled over again, throwing out another

bow wave as it frantically changed course. A second plane buzzed it, and then another and another.

"Our planes," Morley gasped in a strangled voice.

"Thank the Lord," someone exclaimed. A cheer rang out.

Morley followed the lead plane as it came around again, approaching at a right angle to the ship's path. A streak shot out from under one wing and his mind grasped the fact that it was a rocket even as it crossed the small boat's bow and exploded in the sea beyond.

"Firing rockets," he exclaimed tersely. The cheer came again and died almost instantly, replaced by a tense silence. Another rocket crossed the boat's bow, and then a third, this time much closer. He realized that the planes weren't trying to destroy the ship, but to drive it back; the rockets plainly said, *"If you keep coming, you'll get it!"*

The boat changed its heading again, weaving through the cold water as it headed back toward the Diomedes—the Russian side, he noted. He passed the word and the resulting cheer was loud and prolonged. When the small boat had disappeared in one direction and the planes in another, racing eastward into Alaska, Morley straightened from the scope and glanced around him. "Someone in Washington remembered," he said.

"That sweet Air Force—I love it," Winn uttered with a profound sigh.

"At least we're still at peace," Lieutenant Karsh observed. "If we weren't, the Air Force would have clobbered that baby."

"Peace?" asked Winn. "If this is peace, what the hell was that small boat trying to do?"

"A good question," Morley admitted; but he didn't have an answer.

"Ice ahead," Chief Kelsey called from sonar.

Ice—everything was back to normal. Morley felt a reprieve as he studied the berg on the scope and ordered a change in course. Icebergs were nothing—not after what they'd just been through. He looked at the fathometer; they had less than twenty feet of water under the keel and now they were cruising with the sail and upper hull exposed. He'd

be glad when they reached deep water again—even Russian water.

Radar reported another group of planes coming in from the east, and followed with an outpouring of data on their range, speed and position. Several minutes later he glimpsed the planes hurtling low over the strait and exhaled slowly, conscious of an inner relief.

The executive officer put the feeling into words. "Someone's giving us an umbrella," he observed.

"Deep water, that's what I want," the navigator said. He grinned at the captain. "It'll feel damned good to get that ice cap over our heads again."

"I wouldn't be surprised." When the water deepened, he brought the *Batfish* down, running at periscope depth. When sonar reported the immediate area ice-free, he increased speed to twenty knots.

Five hours later the bow of the *Batfish* sliced into the Chukchi Sea. Flat and shallow like the Bering Sea south of the strait, its depth varied between 100 and 170 feet. Running straight ahead, on course 000 true, Morley felt that he had it made.

He was feeling that way when radioman Lloyd Parman rushed him a secret dispatch.

"So, that's it," Morley said, "Latitude eighty North, Longitude eighty East—right smack in Russia's back yard, so to speak. Or is it the front yard?" Leaning back, he surveyed his senior officers across the table in the small wardroom. Lieutenant Commander Carter Winn pursed his thin lips thoughtfully.

"Eighty by eighty," Lieutenant Taylor echoed musingly. "It makes a mighty square figure."

Morley smiled at the navigator. "Do you foresee any unusual problems?"

"Not particularly," Taylor answered; "except that we're talking about some eighteen hundred miles of water, every inch of it Russian."

"And ninety percent of it under ice," the executive officer put in.

Winn had a point and Morley acknowledged it. "But

the ice gives us a certain amount of protection." He glanced at the clock and made a fast mental calculation. "We have exactly eighty hours to arrive on station."

"Eighty hours?" Lieutenant Commander George Wolfe, the engineering officer, tilted his head quizzically.

"Eighty hours at the outside," Morley repeated firmly. He looked at Wolfe. Ordinarily the engineering officer would be no part of such a session, but Morley believed in keeping his senior officers fully informed, at least insofar as possible. A few secrets he had to bear alone.

"That averages out to almost twenty knots," Wolfe pointed out.

"No strain for this buggy," Taylor observed.

"I'm not so certain," the executive officer cut in. "We're talking about shallow seas and ice, and certainly not a direct route." Morley appreciated the point. If Winn appeared unduly cautious, Morley knew differently. His executive officer was a man who liked to plan ahead; Morley had seen those plans pay off many times before.

They discussed the problems of navigation briefly. Winn contended they should proceed by a more northerly route to get the benefit of deeper water and to avoid the sonar devices and anti-submarine devices which Russia undoubtedly had distributed in the more shallow offshore seas.

Taylor disagreed—he favored a direct route. "If we're on Red Alert One, so is Russia," he argued. "They already know we're around—they checked us out in the strait."

"That they did," Morley commented wryly.

Winn looked at him. "We'd have more maneuvering room farther north," he countered.

"We haven't time for maneuvering," the engineering officer declared, "Not if we're going to arrive on station at the assigned time."

"We'd damned well better." Morley turned to his executive officer. "We'll take the most direct route possible—get there fustest with the mostest."

"I'll lay out the plot," Taylor volunteered.

"Do that, Bill." Morley nodded, signifying that the session was at end. As the others rose to go, he detained Winn with a gesture.

The executive officer sank back into his chair with a deep sigh and made a steeple with his hands. Looking at him, Morley decided there was a very little he could say that Winn didn't already know, or had guessed. Winn was prescient, at times disturbingly so. Morley often used him as a sounding board.

When they were alone, he said, "This is probably worse than we know, Carter."

"I've suspected that."

"We're still at peace; at least I hope we are."

"But at a very close edge," Winn asserted. "They'd never risk sending us this deep into Russian waters unless the situation warranted it."

"I've considered that."

"So what do we do if a Russian killer sub picks us up—flight back? If we sink one in Russian waters and we are at peace, we won't be for long."

"That point's weighed heavily on me," Morley admitted.

"You can bet they'd sink us."

"And justifiably. Right now we're in the position of burglars; we're making an unlawful entry."

"Are we?" Winn arched his eyes. "They don't own the Arctic deeps."

"The effect is the same and that's what counts." Morley smiled grimly. "Not too long back we caught a Russian missile submarine lurking off San Francisco and clobbered it. No word was said by either the Russian government or ours. This would be the same situation."

"That's why I was fighting for maneuvering room," Winn replied.

"I realize that, but we're going to have to hustle like hell as it is." He raised his eyes. "To answer your earlier question, we'll run as long as we can. We can't afford to fight in these waters, not while the world technically is at peace."

"Would we know that?" asked Winn. "Anything might happen while we're under ice, communications being what they are."

"We'll have to assume a state of peace until we do know,"

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Morley declared. "At the same time, we'll have to operate as if we were at war."

"War . . . the possibility scares me."

"And me. I can't imagine a nuclear exchange." Morley shook his head disbelievingly. "I can't imagine that their leaders or ours would allow it to happen, if for no other reason than that neither side could win."

"Except possibly the Chinese," Winn observed. "Peng Yi would be riding high in the saddle if Russia and the U.S. clobbered each other."

Morley nodded. "That thought no doubt has occurred to both American and Russian leaders, Carter."

"We'll have to contend with that monkey some day."

"I'm inclined to view China as a Russian problem."

"You might have a point." Winn sucked at his long lip. "But right now we have other worries. You said that this probably was worse than we know, and I have a hunch you're right."

"I hope you're wrong, Carter."

"So do I." The executive officer asked more slowly, "Novaya Zemlya?"

"That is our target area," Morley admitted.

"But why move in so close? I can't figure that. We could clobber the place from a thousand miles greater distance, unless . . ." Winn hesitated, frowning his brow.

"Unless what?" Morley urged.

"Unless they plan to strike at such a short range that there'd be no time for tracking—no time for response."

"You're suggesting?"

"A preventive strike," Winn declared flatly.

"Preventive war? I can't see us in that role."

"I didn't say 'war,' I said 'strike.' It could be a strike to prevent war."

"An interesting conjecture," Morley conceded. Winn was verging on an idea that had lurked deep within his own consciousness, yet somehow had lacked clarity. What kind of situation would make such an action feasible? Knocking out Novaya Zemlya would badly cripple Russia, but it certainly wouldn't render her powerless. More likely it would precipitate war. He ran the possibilities through his mind,

unable to grasp any reasonable explanation. Finally he gave up. "There's too much we don't know," he observed.

"We're also faced with tactical problems," Winn pressed.

Morley smiled faintly, marveling at the speed at which the executive officer leaped from one arena of ideas into another. "We are," he agreed.

"Suppose we find our station under a heavy ice cover? It's quite likely."

"I'm anticipating that," Morley answered. "At this time of year we should be able to locate ice-free clearings. Or if the ice is sufficiently thin we can break through. We'll have to meet those problems when the time comes."

"*Captain, will you come in, please?*" The voice of Lieutenant Karsh sounded urgently in the speaker. Morley rose quickly and headed toward the control room with Winn at his heels.

"The ice is thickening," Karsh reported tersely. "We cleared that last berg with but ten feet to spare and only twelve feet of water under the keel."

"Reduce speed one-third," Morley ordered. He glanced at the fathometers and then at the topside recording pen, watching as it traced the underside contour of the ice. Karsh was right: each downward sloping peak penetrated farther than the one preceding. The *Batfish* could end in an undersea *cul-de-sac* that could be both dangerous and time-consuming.

"Ice dead ahead," Chief Kelsey called from sonar.

"Come right to north," Morley instructed.

"*Come right to north.*" The call echoed back through the speakers. Morley felt the slight shifting of forces on his body as the *Batfish* swung to starboard. Moments later he was gratified to find the water deepening. When the fathometer showed twenty-five feet under the hull, he brought the ship back to its original heading and increased speed.

"We can't afford to pick our way like this," Winn commented.

"Perhaps conditions will improve," Morley reflected, certain that they wouldn't. At the same time, the deeply submerged bergs and underwater ice shelves masked the

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ship's acoustical noises and made detection and tracking extremely difficult. He said so.

"We have to weigh protection against time," Winn answered.

"I'm attempting to."

"Shoaling again, Captain," Lieutenant Karsh said crisply.

"Ice ahead," Chief Kelsey called.

"Take her down another ten feet," Morley ordered, watching the fathometer.

"Aye, aye, sir." The acknowledgment came instantly through the metallic speaker.

"Reduce speed to dead slow."

"Aye, aye, sir."

The writing pen started downward again. Morley watched it move lower and lower, conscious that but few feet of water lay under the *Batfish's* keel. The pen reached a depth just several feet above the sail and leveled out again. Morley kept his eyes glued to it, conscious of the tension and stillness around him. For several seconds that seemed long hours the pen jiggled up and down before, finally, it began to recede.

Morley exhaled slowly. Winn was right; they needed deeper water. "Come right to north," he ordered. A few moments later, as the water deepened, he again increased speed. Within ten minutes they had a hundred feet of water under the keel and he brought the speed up to two-thirds, keeping the bow pointed into the north.

They were running at top speed in the clear when Chief Kelsey's voice sounded urgently from sonar: "Blip at eight thousand yards bearing one-seven-five. Fast screws, Captain."

"Any idea what it is, Chief?"

"A moment, one moment," Kelsey answered. In the agonized silence that followed, Morley heard the whisper of a pump. The faces around him had grown tense, expectant. "Submarine . . . a big steel fish," Kelsey called.

"Report the ice!"

"Clear ahead—a big baby off our port."

"Come left twenty degrees," Morley snapped to Lieutenant Karsh. He looked at Winn. "We're going to be play-

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ing tag in the ice." He turned back, feeling the ship pulse around him.

The chase had begun.

SEVEN

Time: 2:45 P.M., 9 July 1973.

Place: Private retreat outside Peking.

WONG SI FEE's hand trembled and he fought to control it. The trouble was the drink; he'd slopped the liquid over the rim of the glass, a dead give-away to his emotions should anyone be watching. He darted his eyes quickly around, relieved that he hadn't been observed.

Leaning forward, he set his glass on a teakwood stand and let his eyes rove over the half dozen visitors Chairman Peng-Yi so abruptly had summoned to his private retreat outside the city. Peng Yi was deep in murmured conversation with Hu Ning, his Minister of Information. Slender, ascetic, his face austere, Peng was doing the talking. Hu Ning listened, his coal-black eyes devoid of expression. Off to one side, the aged Marshal Huang Shao-chi chatted with Sun Po-chu, the First Vice Premier of the Communist Party. Opposite them, the youthful General Li Chi, the head of China's armed forces, was closeted with Wu Han, the head of Peng's secret police. Wong noted that their glances seldom strayed from Peng's face.

Premier Tan Fu-chun was absent. Wong wondered if it had anything to do with the whispers that the aged Premier had opposed the Chairman's efforts to bring about a nuclear war between Russia and the Imperialist West. But Tan was old and frail; perhaps he was sick. When he considered it, he realized that Tan was much like Lu Sing Kai. Lu was old and frail also, but his mind remained wondrously sharp. University presidents should be old, he reflected, for wisdom is born of age out of the experience of youth; in time, perhaps, he would be as wise as his good friend. If he were granted time. The thought brought a quick, panicky feeling that he fought to suppress.

As usual on such occasions, he sat alone. Of all those present, only he was not a politician. As President of the Chinese Academy of Sciences and as Peng's chief science advisor, he moved in a pale beyond the political thinkers. Yet, he knew, he was trusted as fully as the others—perhaps more so than General Li Chi, who had moved up the power ladder with unseemly haste. It was because Wong was trusted with the Chairman's secrets—at least the scientific ones—that his hand trembled. He knew why the gathering so abruptly had been called; he'd gone over it with Peng earlier in the day.

Now, sitting in the tastefully-decorated room in Peng's private retreat, he wondered why he hadn't lied. Had he lied, perhaps he could have saved the world. Wong shuddered. No one lied to Peng and long graced this world unscathed. The fear of Peng was greater even than the terror of the bomb. Yet, because of his fear, he had hastened the crisis; in his mind the world was a monstrous fireball.

He straightened as the murmured conversation between Peng and his Minister of Information ended. A rustle ran through the room, terminating in silence. Peng's guests watched him expectantly. Peng sat straighter and his eyes riveted on First Vice Premier Sun Po-chu. He said, "I understand there is some unrest among certain party members, comrade Sun?"

"That is true," Sun Po-chu replied imperturbably. "Our beloved comrade Tan is perturbed." The name of the ancient Premier Tan Fu-chun evoked a respectful silence. Tan was venerated in the hearts of the soldiers, workers and farmers as well as by the rank and file members of the Communist Party. No man within the party would attack him lightly, not even the Chairman. All eyes swung toward Peng Yi, waiting. Sun Po-chu's face was bland. Wong sensed the sudden tension in the room and wondered what the Chairman might say.

Peng smiled slightly. "Comrade Tan is our venerated elder and the party owes him much," he observed.

"That is true," the Vice Premier murmured.

"Yet old men cling to the present and live in the past."

"That is the way with ancients, comrade Peng."

"We listen to comrade Tan with respectful reverence, yet our decisions must be made in a technological world of which he is unaware," Peng continued. "It is our unhappy lot to contend with a barbarism our elders seldom knew."

"Quite true," Sun Po-chu agreed.

"Our elders should philosophize in silence," Peng suggested. He nodded graciously toward the aged Marshal Huang Shao-chi and said, "Except for comrade Huang, who views the world with the eyes of youth."

Huang chuckled. When the silence swept back, Sun Po-chu said, "I will suggest a suitable retreat to comrade Tan."

"That would be wise," Pang agreed. He glanced coldly around and added sharply, "Only men who believe in the greatness of China's destiny will share in the fruits to come."

He has disposed of Tan nicely, Wong thought. Tan would spend his remaining days in comfort. Not so a lesser man. Involuntarily he shivered.

Sun Po-chu said imperturbably, "What passes for unrest is perhaps no more than uncertainty. We dwell in a fearful age, comrade Peng."

"Fearful, perhaps, but I believe our sons will call it glorious."

"That is to be hoped."

"You have doubts?"

"It is said that the future is a gray veil beyond which no man can see."

"Man creates his future," Peng admonished.

Vice Premier Sun Po-chu gazed serenely at the Chairman. He had a young-old face, seamed and textured like scroll paper, yet curiously alive. It appeared animated, yet Wong could not say why, for the dark eyes were flat and blank. He knew that the Vice Premier was as politically adept as any man in the room, Peng included. Had not Sun emerged unscathed from the great purge of '66 in which comrades all around him had fallen? Sun Po-chu bowed gravely. "That also is true," he said.

Peng suddenly sat straighter. The Vice Premier watched him expectantly; Wong did the same. Was the room cold?

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He sensed a chill. The Chairman's face held a look he couldn't decipher.

"We have a problem," Peng said crisply.

Sun Po-chu nodded politely. "Problems give industry to man," he observed gravely.

"That is true," Peng acknowledged.

"Unity of thought resolves all things," Sun Po-chu continued.

Listening to the polite exchange that preceded the real reason for the meeting, Wong found time to regret that he hadn't specialized in the sciences of the mind rather than those of the physical world. The mind was infinitely deeper, more obscure. How could Peng be so learned in politics, yet fail to have learned that the politics of power also were the politics of oblivion? Did not greatness correlate with the ability to discern the future, using it as a guide to decision?

But these were power-hungry men, he reflected, and the hunger for power quenched all reason. Power-hungry, all except the aged Marshal Huang Shao-chi, who remained a member of Peng's inner circle only because of his great prestige. Huang was contented with his lot. He was revered by the toiler in the fields; no better could be said for any man. Peng was extremely cognizant of the esteem with which he was held, and acted accordingly. General Li Chi was another matter. Young, intelligent, with driving ambition, he had clamped a firm hold on China's armies. In another few years, if fate allotted him the time, he would pose a threat to Peng; at such a time Peng would get rid of him. But at the moment he needed Li very much.

Peng suddenly straightened, signifying that the amenities were at an end. Scrutinizing the faces around him, he said, "The bomb which comrade Trofimuk so conveniently placed in orbit has failed to precipitate the expected crisis."

"A puzzling development," Sun Po-chu observed. He raised his eyes to look at the Chairman. "Is the American government aware of the bomb?"

"Very much so, comrade Sun."

"That it is a bomb?" asked Sun Po-chu. "Why would

they suspect the nature of it? Many satellites are launched."

Peng smiled politely. "Our good Minister of Information—he nodded toward Hu Ning—"arranged for word of the satellite's true nature to reach the American CIA office in Hong Kong. Through a neutral source," he added.

"Then why has the American President not acted?"

"Sources within the Kremlin inform us that the President talked directly with Chairman Chernychev."

"But prior to the time the information on the nature of the satellite reached the CIA," the Minister of Information interjected.

"Precisely; the American President acted quickly," Peng said.

"Perhaps they will yet launch war," the Vice Premier observed.

"The processes of their decadent society are extremely slow," Peng admitted.

"I am puzzled," Sun Po-chu continued. "Did comrade Chernychev deny the bomb?"

"That is our information," Peng acceded.

"Would the Americans accept a denial?" Sun Po-chu's voice held disbelief.

"It seems inconceivable."

General Li Chi asked sharply, "Could comrade Chernychev not yet be aware of the bomb?"

"That is possible," Peng admitted. "Great care was taken to suppress the information. If comrade Chernychev learned of it at this stage, he would, perhaps, tell the Americans in an attempt to prevent war."

"Could such information be suppressed?" asked Sun Po-chu.

"The base commander has been instructed to that effect," Peng answered. "Fortunately, the base is above the Arctic Circle."

"Rumor is the great leapfrog, comrade Peng."

"The base commander is maintaining normal communications with the general staff in Moscow," Peng explained. "He has sent nothing to indicate any unusual circumstances."

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General Li Chi's eyes grew curious. "How did the American President react?"

"That we do not know," Peng smiled, a cold, stiff smile that sent a chill through Wong's thin body. "But America has put her military forces on full alert. Her missiles are poised and ready."

"Russia?" Sun Po-chu murmured.

"Is also on full alert," Peng supplied. "The lack of a nuclear exchange is baffling."

"Perhaps an ultimatum has been delivered."

"That is our hope," Peng acceded.

Wong followed the conversation closely. The First Vice Premier's role as devil's advocate was part of a drama that continued unending in the highest levels of government. Peng Yi, as Chairman of the Communist Party and its absolute dictator, held undisputed power, yet every major decision was brought into question, just as Sun Po-chu was doing now. It was not a question of authority. The function served to suggest that major decisions were shared; at the same time, it alleviated the Chairman's responsibility should decisions prove wrong. The interrogation also served to exercise the Chairman's authority in the presence of those who supported him. Should the decisions this day prove wrong, it would not be Peng's head that fell; none knew this better than the Vice Premier. The head that would fall would be his, for the failure to ask the proper questions. Wong reflected that politics was a strange creature.

Sun Po-chu leaned toward his host. "Could comrade Chernychev suspect that the satellite might be of American origin?"

"We have hoped for that possibility," Peng admitted, "but it is more likely that he has ordered the alert to appease his military. They yap at his heels like a pack of dogs."

General Li Chi stiffened and anger suffused his face. Staring at the Chairman, he said coldly, "Yet dogs pull down the biggest stag."

Wong felt the tension crackle like electricity around him before Sun Po-chu quickly interjected, "What will happen when comrade Trofimuk presses the button?"

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"Nothing." Peng's smile was ironic.

"Nothing?"

"Trofimuk's button leads to nowhere."

Sun Po-chu's face wrinkled in question. "I do not understand, comrade Peng."

"Control of the bomb has been transferred to my hand."

"Oh?" Surprised exclamations arose and the Vice Premier looked startled. Wong saw that neither the Minister of Information nor Wu Han, the head of the secret police, appeared surprised.

Sun Po-chu asked cautiously, "If we control the bomb ...?"

"It is to our advantage to have Russia and the United States devastate each other without our intervention," the Chairman interrupted. "Once hostilities start, we will add the weight of the bomb," he added.

"How do we accomplish this, comrade Peng?"

"The bomb story must be broken by neutral sources and in media which neither the United States nor Russia controls. The source will be attributed to a high Russian official who fears an atomic holocaust." Peng glanced at his Minister of Information. "Hu is proceeding with the matter now."

"Will the launching be attributed to comrade Chernychev?"

"Yes, of course."

"And will the official making the disclosure be named?"

"The Russian Foreign Minister," Peng explained. "Fortunately he is visiting in East Germany and is vulnerable."

"Ah!" Sun Po-chu sighed.

Wong listened nervously, caught with a sense of dire disaster. He'd read every word ever written by Mao and his successors during the *hsueh-hsi*, the group studies in which everyone was forced to participate. Not even the President of the Chinese Academy of Science was exempt. There was an old joke that ran: "Does Mao read Mao during the *hsueh-hsi*?"

The answer: "Certainly, comrade. No one is exempt." Now the same story was being whispered about Peng. The forced reading hadn't bothered Wong so much as the nature of the material itself. War was a historical necessity;

the final conflict with the West was inevitable. And peace was counter-revolutionary; thoughts of peace were *revisionist* thoughts.

Until today, all that had appeared in the realm of theory; now he was listening to theory being transformed into actuality. The philosophy forged in the day of the rifle was coming to life in the day of the nuclear bomb. Even though the road led to world destruction, Peng would not falter. He had closed his mind to everything but ultimate victory. Victory was certain!

Did the others really believe that? Did General Li Chi? The General couldn't believe it, Wong thought. Li Chi certainly realized the consequences of such a war. Yet, what could Li Chi do? What could any of them do? A wave of helplessness engulfed him anew. He became aware that the Vice Premier was speaking again.

"What if neither the United States nor Russia reacts after the story is made public?" Sun Po-chu asked.

"Then China must act," Peng answered. "After all, we hold the key."

"Act how?"

Peng lifted his head. "I will press the button. At the same instant the commander at Novaya Zemlya will unleash twenty ICBMs—fifteen toward major targets in the United States."

"And the other five?"

"Russian targets, of course. Moscow must die."

Sun Po-chu said softly, "I don't doubt you, comrade Peng, but would Russian soldiers do such a thing? It is inconceivable."

"The soldiers know only the buttons they press, not the missile destinations," Peng explained. "Only the men who program the missiles know that."

"Can they be trusted?"

Peng indicated his head of the secret police. "Thanks to Wu, they are our men. Is that not true, Wu?"

"Bought and paid for," Wu Han assented blandly.

"If we possess this great power, why do we not push the button now?" asked the Vice Premier.

"Our armies are moving into favorable position," Peng explained. "Time is on our side."

"Time is the master tactician."

"We also are preparing our own all-out strike," Peng stated. "Our atom bombers will play a proper role. Perhaps, then, the world will believe in China's hydrogen bomb."

"I see no flaw, comrade Peng." Sun Po-chu bowed, humbly.

"One problem remains," Peng said. The words had an ominous ring in Wong's ears. In the ensuing silence, General Li Chi lifted his eyes, waiting.

"What is the problem?" Sun Po-chu asked.

"There is some difficulty with the bomb." A stir ran through the room and Peng added, "We might have to bring it down sooner than planned."

"What is the difficulty?" Sun Po-chu asked.

"It is of a technical nature." Peng glanced at his science advisor and instructed, "Explain it to them, comrade Wong."

Wong straightened, attempting to stem the trembling in his thin body. "The warhead has an unusually low perigee," he explained. His voice sounded high and unnatural in his ears.

"Low perigee?" Sun Po-chu murmured.

"It passes through a greater molecular density at each near passage," he explained. "This results in drag—a slowing effect. When its forward velocity has been sufficiently reduced, it will be caught by gravity."

"It will reenter?" asked General Li Chi sharply.

"Yes, that is it." He nodded, aware of the fullness in his throat.

"Then it might come down anywhere?"

"We haven't sufficient data to predict its reentry point," Wong explained.

"Will it explode?" asked the Vice Premier.

"During reentry? Not unless the proper signal is sent." Wong hesitated. "If no signal is sent, it will be destroyed by the friction of its passage through the denser atmosphere below."

Wu Han, the head of the secret police, scrutinized him sharply. "Why is that?" he demanded. "It reenters in either case."

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"It is a matter of the warhead's attitude."

"Attitude?"

Despite his fear, Wong smiled tolerantly. Wu Han was a clod. They all were. They were playing with a toy without the slightest knowledge of how it worked, or of its potential. The insight gave him a superior feeling. He said, "If it is caught by gravity as the result of accumulated drag, it undoubtedly would be in tumble. That would subject it to tremendous stresses and heat loads—certainly enough to destroy its firing mechanism."

"The correct attitude prevents that?"

"Yes, certainly."

"How does it work?" Wu Han asked insistently.

"The bomb carrier senses the Earth's horizon, aligns itself in the direction of flight," Wong explained.

"And when it dips below the horizon?"

Wong said patiently, "The retro-thrust that slows the rocket also activates gas jets that maintain the rocket's attitude. A barometric device determines when the bomb goes off," he finished.

"And yet such a bomb has never been tested," Wu Han observed.

"Not as a bomb, but the principle has been tested many times in both manned and unmanned vehicles," Wong contended.

"Then you regard it as foolproof?"

"Yes, certainly."

"I'd rather depend on the foot soldier," Marshal Huang declared.

"It is much too good a bomb to waste," the Minister of Information cut in.

"We have no intention of wasting it," Peng assured him.

"How much time do we have?" asked General Li Chi.

"Wong calculates a minimum of four more days," the Chairman cut in. "The bomb must be used before then."

General Li Chi said sharply, "We need every minute we can get to prepare ourselves."

"I am cognizant of that," Peng responded. "We will not bring the bomb down until the last possible moment. Unless, of course, war erupts first."

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Sun Po-chu asked gravely, "Are we not teasing a tiger?" "How is that?"

"Do we not risk much by waiting? How do we know the bomb has four days? Suppose that this drag, as comrade Wong calls it, accumulates in a shorter period?"

"Wong?" the Chairman snapped.

"Our data allows us four days," Wong answered, feeling a sudden nausea. He cursed himself for having admitted the perigee problem when questioned earlier by the Chairman. The information had been sent directly to Peng by the tracking stations, of course, so he had little choice but to substantiate it. Still, if he'd had the courage to deny the forces that slowly were pulling the warhead back into the Earth's grip, perhaps the bomb would have destroyed itself. But he'd feared Peng more than he had the bomb. Bitterly Wong admitted he was a coward.

"Has anyone else checked the data?" asked General Li Chi.

"Wong bears full responsibility for the time limit," Peng answered. He looked at the scientist. "Is that not true, Wong?"

"Yes, of course," he mumbled.

"I'd rather depend on marching men," Marshal Huang Shao-chi repeated. He chuckled. "In my experience, battles are won by the infantry."

"In the ultimate, that is true," Peng returned politely. Huang gestured grandiosely. "We have slept long enough."

"We will sleep no longer, comrade Huang."

"The armies of China are ready," General Li Chi said soberly.

"I regret that my years are too many to take to the field again," the Marshal declared. He chuckled and subsided into silence.

"We have a deadline, comrades." Peng scanned the faces around him. "Within four days."

"Or sooner," Sun Po-chu observed solemnly.

"Perhaps." Peng rose abruptly, signifying that the conference was at end. Rising, Wong fought to control the sudden weakness that gripped his body. Four days! My

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God, didn't the fools know what they were doing? He turned away, hoping Peng wouldn't see his face.

He was certain it was terror-stricken.

His frail body wrapped in a warm robe, Lu Sing Kai sat in solitude, watching the wind sway the linden trees that dotted the campus of Peking University. The trees moved gently, gracefully. Splashes of light cast by the waxing moon filtered through the branches, creating moving patterns on the grass.

Chairman Peng Yi controlled the bomb! Wong's words came back, and with them Lu Sing Kai saw again the fear that suffused the physicist's face as the story poured from his lips. Wong had been most distraught. His speech had been rambling, at times almost incoherent, yet Lu Sing Kai had discerned a sorrow along with the terror. Wong's sorrow had been for the world.

Lu Sing Kai closed his eyes, deep in thought. The questions puzzling him following Wong's first visit now were clear. As he'd suspected, Trofimuk was but a pawn; soon he would be swept into the dust of history. But that was inconsequential. Peng was the problem. Peng hoped to use the orbital warhead to precipitate a nuclear exchange between the United States and Russia. Failing that, he would initiate the war himself.

He stirred, contemplating the enormity of it. America would respond immediately once the warhead commenced reentry and the ICBMs rushed in over the pole. America would respond blindly, totally, hurling its entire nuclear arsenal against the sprawling body of Russia. Russia would respond in turn. England, France, West Germany and the other nuclear-armed nations would join in the conflict, for the fear of all nations would itself ensure that no atomic device remained unused.

With the world prostrate under its own blows, Peng's armies would march. They would flow over the Earth like locusts while his air force smashed the remnants of civilization. Japan, India, Turkey, Australia—ultimately the world; that was Peng's plan. How little he knew of history. How

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little he understood. Nor could he be made to understand.

That was the tragedy of it, he thought.

But four days; the world had four days to live! Perhaps less. He wished he might talk with Tan Fu-chun, but Wong had revealed that the aged Premier was being whisked into isolation. Tan's voice was gone; with it reason had flown. Lu Sing Kai felt a sadness at the loss of his old friend; surely Tan would never return. Now the burden lay with him.

He pushed himself upward from the chair, looking again at the linden trees. There was much that an old man might do. But he had to hurry.

The river of time flowed swiftly.

EIGHT

Time: 11:30 P.M., 9 July 1973.

Place: Hong Kong.

CHESTER HAMMIT watched the glow of Hong Kong grow brighter as the jet airliner banked and came in over the South China Sea on its landing approach to the Kai Tak Airport, which jutted out into the bay like a long concrete finger.

Across the dark splotch of water he saw the lights of Kowloon, "The City of the Nine Dragons," where the last emperor of the Sung Dynasty had taken refuge from the advancing Mongols. Beyond loomed the dark hills of China.

Hammit stemmed his impatience. It was near midnight, local time, and the plane was running a good three hours late—three hours he could ill afford. Hours had become more precious than gold in the short time since the XMSV-1 had been destroyed in orbit. For most of that time, Hammit felt, the Nation had been floundering in the dark, ready to strike out blindly from a position of strength but with no tangible target. There was nowhere to fix the sights, nothing but suspicion and inconclusive evidence.

The President had put the Nation on full alert; Jim Guyer was rushing a new astroplane into orbit; and God only knew what Phil Massey was doing. The moves were neces-

sary, yet futile until the identity of the enemy was known. It could only be Russia, and yet . . . It was the "and yet" that vexed him.

Was he on a wild goose chase? Watching the plane glide lower, he wondered. *A nuclear bomb is in the sky!* That anonymous telephone call to Chuck Wylie, the CIA agent in Hong Kong, had started him on his mad flight across half the globe. *An anonymous phone call!* It was little enough to go on, yet someone in Hong Kong knew the nature of the huge rocket that had risen from the snowfields of Novaya Zemlya. The knowledge had hammered at his mind since.

Five days left. No, four, even less. He fretted uneasily. He'd consumed more than a day since the tracking stations had reported that the satellite, accumulating drag during each passage through perigee, would reenter at the end of that time. The trackers also predicted that were its reentry unprogrammed, the satellite would be destroyed by the tremendous stresses and heat loads during passage through the lower atmosphere.

Hammit knew that it wouldn't be destroyed. So did Jim Guyer, Phil Massey, the President. Whoever had put the bomb into orbit would initiate a proper reentry before that deadline came. It could come at any hour, any minute, any second. The knowledge flamed like a bright torch in his consciousness.

One other bit of information bothered him. Chuck Wylie, the Hong Kong agent, ostensibly was an American business man. His cover was Foreign Exports, a small shop on Queen's Road. Yet the anonymous caller had phoned Wylie directly! A small number of persons knew Wylie's cover, of course, but still . . .

Hammit tossed the knowledge around in his mind. The call suggested a counter-agent; but if so, why the warning? Coming from Hong Kong, it also suggested a Chinese agent. Although the informant had spoken English, Wylie stated emphatically that the speaker had been Chinese. Wylie should know; he spoke several Chinese dialects fluently.

Why the warning? He returned to the question that had puzzled him from the first. Was the bomb somehow related

to the reports of massive troop movements within China? Satellite and jet drone surveillance had shown a mammoth buildup in key border areas. Could Peng Yi, China's dictator, have learned the nature of the satellite? Did he believe it directed against China?

The thought intrigued him. If so, Peng Yi might very well attempt to paint the bomb as a threat to the West in the hope that the United States would take counter-action to destroy it. That could, in part, account for China's troop movements. But not for the armies and aircraft massing opposite Formosa, he reflected. Those moves weakened the theory. But if Peng Yi could bring about a war between the United States and Russia . . .

He kicked the idea around. Jim Guyer and Admiral Massey had played with the same reasoning earlier. The logic was good, except that it failed to explain the launching from Novaya Zemlya. All theories stumbled there.

Hammit sighed. He'd exhausted every possibility with the information he had. He needed more, and he needed it soon. Perhaps it lay there in the glittering city now rushing toward him in the night. ♦

The plane touched down and taxied to a halt under the airport floodlights. Chuck Wylie was waiting. Hammit spotted him immediately, a tall, gangling man of around forty, with a long, angular face and thinning brown hair.

Wylie acknowledged Hammit's nod and crossed the ramp with a slight limp, the result of shell fragments he'd collected early in the Vietnam fighting. Those wounds had taken him out of the Army and into the CIA. His expertise on the Orient had resulted in his assignment to Hong Kong.

Hammit met him at the bottom of the ramp. They scarcely spoke until after Wylie shepherded him through a cursory customs inspection and out to the old Volkswagen he customarily drove.

"Discover anything?" asked Hammit, as Wylie started the car.

"Nothing." Wylie's voice was baffled. "Couldn't trace the call."

"I thought they might follow it up."

"Kwaila's posted by the phone."

"Good." Hammit nodded approvingly. Kwaila Johnson, the daughter of a retired British army officer and a Chinese mother, had been Wylie's girl Friday for over five years. She operated the small export business the agent had established as his cover and, more importantly, acted as his eyes and ears in the Chinese community. Hammit had implicit faith in her.

"I've set up a few listening posts," Wylie commented.

Hammit said gravely, "We have to discover the source of that call within four days. After that will be too late."

"Too late?" Wylie glanced questioningly at him.

"The bomb's due to reenter by then; perhaps sooner."

"There is a bomb?" the agent exclaimed. "I thought it was a code name for something."

"A code name for nuclear death," Hammit replied grimly, "and don't ask about the space treaty."

"I wouldn't think of it."

"Hammit related the entire story, omitting nothing. "Perhaps Hong Kong's a dead end," he finished.

Wylie shook his head. "Whoever called knows about the bomb. That much of the story is here."

"Novaya Zemlya to Hong Kong is a long way, Chuck."

"Not in this business," Wylie denied. "The world's tied together with strange strings."

"I still can't understand the call—the reason for it." Hammit glanced sideways at his companion. "I always ask myself the question: Who stands to gain?"

"Peng Yi," the agent answered softly.

"Exactly; he's the one who would gain from a nuclear exchange between the United States and Russia. With both the big boys stoned, he'd ride high in the saddle."

Wylie smiled wryly. "Do you really believe so?"

"No, but he does, and that amounts to the same thing."

"There could be something to the theory," Wylie acknowledged. "All hell's breaking loose in China. I've shot along a couple of cables since you left Washington."

"Brief me," Hammit instructed.

"The Red Guard demonstrated some two hundred thousand strong in front of the Soviet embassy in Peking earlier today. They stoned and wrecked the place for good."

"Any special significance?"

"Only that similar riots are erupting all over China, both anti-American and anti-Russian. Remember the big riots of '67? Shanghai, Peking, Canton, Nanking—the Red Guards damned near wrecked the country."

"That was an internal battle for power."

"This is starting the same way. *Fan Hsui Lu*, the 'Struggle Against Revisionism' is the battle cry." Wylie looked at him. "Perhaps it is internal, or perhaps not. Or both. Peng could be rallying the country, girding it, but why I don't know."

"Or masking something," Hammit reflected.

"Aside from that, China's Third Army is moving into position along India's border together with a number of armored divisions. I understand around twenty divisions are being rushed north, reportedly opposite Vladivostok and up around Khabarovsk."

"Where'd you hear that?" Hammit asked sharply.

"Henry Pei."

Hammit nodded. Henry Pei, an editor on the English language newspaper, had extensive pipelines running into China. He'd served the CIA before and Hammit knew him as accurate. "So China's moving."

"Pei also got a buzz on preparations for an air strike."

"Air strike?" Hammit jerked his head around.

"So Pei believes. He says they're dusting off the atom bombers. I don't know how good the Chinese bomb is but Peng appears to be getting it ready."

"Hydrogen," Hammit rejoined. "The only thing that has saved the world so far is their lack of a suitable ballistic carrier."

"They can raise plenty of hell with planes."

Hammit regarded his companion in the darkness. "Is Peng's posture offensive or defensive? That could be the key."

"That we don't know."

"It gets worse by the hour," Hammit murmured.

"The darkness before dawn, we hope."

"We haven't many dawns left, Chuck."

"I prefer to remain optimistic, thank you. I detest hydro-

gen bombs." The agent sucked at his long underlip and continued, "If we were dealing with Trofimuk instead of Chernychev I could guess at the connection."

"Between the Novaya launch and Peng?"

Wylie nodded. "Trofimuk's an Asiatic."

"He's got his own ambitions," declared Hammit. "I can't see him playing second fiddle to Peng."

"If the promise was big enough?" Wylie smiled. "You can buy almost anyone if the price is right."

"I'm glad you said 'almost,' Chuck."

"A man gets cynical in this business."

"A necessary attitude," Hammit agreed.

Wylie asked, "Does the President still intend to attend the peace talks? Or perhaps I should ask, does Chernychev?"

"As far as I know, yes. This story's still largely below the surface and they're trying to keep it that way, at least until they find some answer. But the President's not sitting on his hands."

"I didn't imagine he was." Wylie twisted his head in the darkness. "How about the bomb? Can't we intercept it or knock it down? We rendezvous up there all the time."

"Polar orbit presents special problems, Chuck. They're time-takers."

"We'd better find the time."

"We're trying," he answered. Watching the lights of Queen's Road flicker past, he wondered again if he were on a wild goose chase.

Kwaila Johnson rose anxiously as they entered Wylie's Foreign Imports shop. Slender and dark-haired, her attractive features were a blend of East and West. She wore a native *cheongsam*. Its wide, slit skirt and shape-clinging lines revealed the litheness of her trim figure. She greeted Hammit warmly but he caught the perturbation in her eyes.

Wylie caught it also. "What is it?" he asked sharply.

"Henry Pei called. He says there's a wire story datelined from West Germany about an orbital bomb. . . ."

"Saying what?" Wylie interrupted harshly.

"The Russians launched one. The story was attributed to the Russian Foreign Minister."

"Gomulka?" Hammit interjected. He felt a stab of surprise, remembering that the Russian Foreign Minister was on a visit to East Germany. He eyed the girl sharply. "You said 'attributed.' Attributed by whom?"

"He didn't say. The story just came in," she explained.

"My God, I can't see Gomulka making a statement like that," exclaimed Wylie. "He'd be finished."

"So he would," Hammit agreed grimly.

"You think it's false?"

"I don't know." He shook his head. "At this stage of the game I'd be afraid to say. He's Chernychev's man, I'd swear to that. I can't see him shooting Chernychev down."

"Or himself," Wylie added. "I'd better get a cable off to Washington."

"They'll know, but do it anyway," Hammit instructed.

As the agent rose to go, the phone rang shrilly. Kwaila answered it. Cupping the mouthpiece, she looked at Wylie and said, "It's Henry Pei again."

"I'll talk with him." He took the instrument from her hand and spoke tersely, then listened attentively. Hammit saw the puzzled frown knit his brow. Wylie asked several low-pitched questions before he replaced the phone and turned. "The Chinese have closed the Shumchun station," he said quietly.

Hammit sucked in his breath sharply. Closing Shumchun, the border station, effectively sealed off Hong Kong and the territory around Kowloon from the remainder of the Asiatic continent. Beyond that, it held grave implications of events within China itself. He said so.

Wylie nodded. "Henry says the regular bridge guards have been replaced with troops. They're swarming all over the place." His frown returned and deepened. "It could be precautionary."

"Against what?" demanded Hammit.

"Why do they usually close a border? To prevent entry or exit?"

"Or to mask what's going on inside China."

"That, too," the agent assented.

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Hammit grimaced. "That shoots Pei's sources of information."

Wylie scowled and got to his feet. "Why don't you grab a few hours sleep. You're going to need it."

"Sleep?"

"Tomorrow could be a long day," he suggested. "You look bushed. Kwaila will cover the phone."

"And you?"

"I'm going to tap every damned source of information in this city," Wylie promised savagely. He left before Hammit could answer.

The following day proved one of vexing disappointment. Hammit pursued several tenuous leads that ended in blind alleys. Nor did Wylie fare better. Henry Pei reported Gomulka's emphatic denial of making the bomb statement but, as Hammit knew, grave damage had been done: the story was sweeping the world. The possible consequences lay heavy in his mind.

Later in the day Henry Pei reported additional evidence of China's build-up. Hammit verified it through several British sources he considered reliable. But all that had nothing to do with the bomb, he reflected. China was a side issue.

When night came again, he was half tempted to return to the States. Hong Kong was a dead end. Or was it?

When finally he went to bed, his mind still held the uncertainty.

"Colonel Hammit, wake up!"

Hammit struggled to consciousness, the words dinning in his brain. He caught the scent of a delicate perfume. *Kwaila*! Abruptly he sat up, sensing her shadowy figure beside the bed. "What is it?"

"Chinese police are combing the city." Her voice was quick with excitement.

"The Hong Kong police?"

"Agents from China," she corrected. "Wylie just phoned. He's on his way here now."

"Where'd he call from?" Hammit swung his feet to the floor and reached for his trousers.

"He was with Lieutenant Chun . . . of the Hong Kong police," she added.

"I know Chun. Did he say what they were after?"

"The Chinese agents?" She shook her head.

"Cover the phone," he instructed crisply. Dressing hurriedly, he reached into his briefcase and drew out an automatic, checking it briefly. How long since he'd used it? Three years, he thought, remembering his encounter in Singapore with "Major Reynolds," the Russian spy master who'd masqueraded as a British army officer. He slipped the gun into his pocket and left the room.

Wylie arrived within moments, his dark eyes aglow with excitement. "Wu Han's in the city," he reported tersely.

"The head of Peng Yi's secret police?" asked Hammit incredulously.

"He crossed the bridge with a group of agents—probably sixteen or eighteen," Wylie explained. "He had a phony passport, but one of Chun's men spotted him on the Shumchun bridge. Chun's got him under surveillance. It's Han, all right."

"I thought the border was closed."

"Their side, not ours."

"Han in Hong Kong," Hammit murmured. He felt a tingle of excitement. The presence in Hong Kong of the head of China's secret police spelled something very big. The bomb? It seemed entirely credible. He couldn't imagine Wu Han risking the crossing on a lesser story. "Any idea who or what he's after?"

"Not yet." Wylie shook his head. "The entire group crossed the bay on the ferry and went directly to the shop of a jade dealer named Ho Ming. Down in the Wanchia district," he added.

"Ho Ming?" Hammit tested the name; it rang no bells.

"He has a record as a smuggler," Wylie offered.

"He's playing a bigger game now," Hammit answered grimly.

"So he is," Wylie agreed. "Everything looked prearranged. Ming lives in the rear of his shop. He let them right in."

"What's Chun doing?"

"Keeping the place under observation," Wylie explained.

"He was going to bag the lot but I convinced him to hold off."

Hammit nodded approvingly. "Did you explain why?"

"Only that we had a bigger game at stake."

"We don't want to tie this to the bomb story," Hammit warned.

"With that blast about Gomulka and the Hong Kong border closed? Chun will put two and two together, but fast."

"If they are tied together."

"I believe they are," the agent answered firmly.

"So do I." Hammit gazed thoughtfully at him. "If Chun could grab one of Han's men . . ."

"He's working on that angle," Wylie cut in. "He'll learn Han's mission soon enough."

"It can't be too soon, Chuck."

Wylie shuddered slightly and said, "I'd hate to be the man Chun puts through the wringer."

"He's very good at extracting information," Hammit agreed equably. "What arrangements did you make with him?"

"He'll let us know the moment anything develops."

"So we wait." Hammit stemmed his impatience at the quick passage of time. How long before the bomb reentered? Three days, a few hours less. No, not that long, he denied irritably. The hand that controlled the bomb certainly would start it down before it could destroy itself in an unprogrammed reentry. How much time then? Days? Hours? He stifled the impulse to move on his own, knowing it would be wasted motion. He had to wait until Chun gave the word.

The phone rang within the hour. Wylie sprang to answer it and spoke a few words before hanging up. He swung toward Hammit and said crisply, "Chun's nabbed one of Han's men."

"Has he talked?"

"He will by the time we get there," Wylie predicted.

Hammit sensed an intense relief and said, "Let's go."

Wylie gave Kwaila a few instructions, then led the way to the Volkswagen. They rode the short distance to the station in silence. Despite the lateness of the hour, cars and

pedicabs threaded the narrow streets. The throb of drums and the wail of saxophones drifted out from brightly lighted night clubs along Queen's Road. Hammit found the music soothing, as if somehow it guaranteed a permanency to a world which, in his mind, trembled on the brink of oblivion Almost before he realized it, Wylie pulled to the curb in front of the police station and parked.

Most police stations in the Orient are drab and poorly lighted. The Hong Kong police station was no exception. Located in a dingy area along Queen's Road, it was designed to maintain law and order among the Crown Colony's teeming population of impoverished rather than among the wealthy few who dwelt in ornate mansions on Victoria Peak and frequented the glittering restaurants and shops below. They were a law unto themselves. Ninety-nine per cent of the people were Chinese.

Entering at Wylie's side, Hammit saw Sergeant Weed, a sallow-faced Englishman he knew from the past, talking into the police radio. Weed nodded recognition without moving his mouth from the mike and pressed a button. A moment later, Lieutenant Chun, the night chief of detectives, bustled in from a side room, his thin face glistening.

"Colonel Hammit, it's good to see you," he exclaimed in flawless English.

"Good to see you, Lieutenant." Hammit shook the proffered hand. He'd worked with the Chinese detective in the past and held him in high esteem. "Has your man talked?"

"Just this moment," Chun affirmed. "He was a trifle reluctant at first."

"I can can imagine," Hammit replied dryly.

Chun's eyes grew still. They revealed nothing, yet Hammit fancied they held a question. "The man they seek is Dr. Lu Sing Kai, the president of Peking University," Chun explained.

"Lu Sing Kai?" Hammit flipped through a mental file, dredging up the likeness of a frail, old man. "He's American-educated, highly regarded in certain academic circles," he offered.

"Philosophy and the history of the East," Chun assented. "We have a dossier."

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"Reportedly he's nonpolitical." Hammit's statement held a question.

"Political enough to ride out several major purges," Chun observed wryly.

"Meaning?"

"Nothing, except that he must have stood high in the party's regard."

"Until now," Hammit corrected.

"Yes, until now."

"Have you learned why they seek him?"

"The agent doesn't know. Apparently Han is extremely anxious to get him back into China."

"Meaning that Peng Yi is anxious," Hammit commented.

"The presence of Wu Han implies that, yes." Chun's dark eyes fixed Hammit's face. "There appears to be more to the story."

"Go on," he urged.

"Premier Tan Fu-chun has been banished from Peking. Also, Peng Yi's chief scientist, a man named Wong Si Fee, was executed by Han's men just before they left Peking."

"Did the prisoner tell you that?"

Chun smiled soberly. "As you Americans say, he sang like a bird."

"Did he say why Wong was executed?"

"He denied knowing and I believe he was telling the truth. He's just an underling."

"There's some relationship," Hammit insisted.

"I feel there is," Chun answered gravely. "It would seem to tie in with the growing demonstrations, perhaps the start of another purge. Banishing the Premier indicates that."

Hammit said musingly, "Tan Fu-chun was a voice of moderation."

"He is venerated by the people," Chun observed.

"Get that off in a cable to Washington," Hammit instructed Wylie crisply. He swung back toward Chun. "We must find Lu Sing Kai before Han does."

"That could be difficult."

"Failing, we have to get him away from Han."

"It's not that clear-cut," Chun warned.

"Any particular reason?"

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The detective nodded. "If they can't get him back into China, they're to kill him. The man we brought in didn't much care which way it went."

"That's not Han's view," Hammit objected. "He could have sent an assassin. Peng Yi wants a breathing body, not a corpse."

"There could be a time element," Chun reflected. "Assassinations, when properly done, usually take time to arrange."

"There's a very definite time element."

Chun rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "We could grab Han's men, give the old man a chance to escape."

"I don't want him to escape," Hammit countered. "I want to get my hands on him. Han seems to know where he might be. Our best chance is to let Han's men lead us to him."

"It might work," Chun observed doubtfully.

"It has to work," Hammit insisted. "Where are Han's men now? That should give us some clue."

"Han remained at the jade shop with perhaps five or six of his men. The rest have fanned out in the neighborhood of Hong Kong University. They apparently expect the action there."

"Makes sense," Hammit agreed. "What are you doing about it?"

"Surveillance, nothing more," Chun declared. "I was about to pull the whole lot of them in but I was dissuaded."

"We have to get Lu Sing Kai alive," Hammit repeated.

"We will do our best."

"It's absolutely essential that we do. The stakes are high." Hammit rubbed his hands together briskly, feeling a glow of excitement. He had scant doubt but that the banishment of Tan Fu-chun and the execution of Peng Yi's chief scientist were related to the university president's flight, and that all three somehow had a bearing on the bomb. Add the demonstrations in China, the massive troop movements and Henry Pei's report on Peng's bomber fleet and it all looked like one big ball of wax. Except for Novaya Zemlya; that link still was missing.

Wylie returned and reported, "Kwaila's handling the

cable. All quiet on that end." Hammit started to reply when the police radio crackled to life and a voice came on, speaking Chinese. Wylie cocked his head. "Action at the university," he murmured.

Sergeant Weed looked up. "Three of Han's men grabbed an old man entering the area where the faculty members live," he told Hammit.

"That'll be Lu Sing Kai," exclaimed Hammit. He felt certain of it. "What's their transportation?"

"They were driving a car they got from Ho Ming."

"The best place to take them will be when they stop in front of the jade shop," Hammit surmised. "We'll have to work fast."

"Why not stop their car before they get there?" asked Wylie.

"They'd kill the old man, Chuck."

"Would it be any different in front of the shop? Han will have men there waiting."

"Perhaps we can catch them by surprise."

"We'd better get started." Chun's voice held scant hope of getting the educator alive. He continued, "I have four men covering Ming's shop."

"This is shaping up more like a battle than a police action," Wylie cracked. "I hope you're bringing the shotgun squad." Chun smiled, his white teeth flashing. He gave a few orders to Sergeant Weed before they went outside to the squad cars.

Experiencing a sharp relief, Hammit climbed in the lead car alongside the Chinese detective. Win or lose, he had the distinct feeling that the conspiracy that had begun at Novaya Zemlya now was rushing toward its ultimate conclusion; he had no intention of losing.

Wylie got into the rear seat next to an English policeman named Limbrook, a squat, older man with iron-gray hair and a look of dour efficiency. A Chinese policeman got in on the other side. A second car filled behind them.

Speeding through the darkened canyon of Queen's Road, Hammit glimpsed the first rays of dawn striking Victoria Peak. He reflected that it would be around four in the afternoon in Washington—and a calendar day earlier. He

relaxed, gazing upward toward the distant mansions. Their windowpanes sparkled like tiny white sails afloat in the dawn light.

Chun cut across town toward the Wanchia district, a crowded section jammed with cabarets, peep joints and small shops that sprawled along the waterfront. Hammit knew it to be a favorite hangout for British and American servicemen; it was also the home of countless dope peddlers, smugglers and lurid girlie shows.

Chun slowed down and pulled toward the curb. "We'd better park a block or so away," he warned.

"How much time do we have?" asked Hammit.

"Not much. It's a fast run down from the university." He parked in the shadow of a dilapidated building and they got out. The second car drew up behind them. Hammit glanced both ways along the street. He glimpsed a few shadowy figures and a pedicab or two in the distance, but nothing that aroused his suspicion. Not that Han wasn't waiting, he reflected. He checked his automatic again and dropped it back into his pocket.

Chun and Wylie came around the car and joined him. Chun described the location and appearance of Ho Ming's jade shop. Lying a block farther down the street, it was sandwiched between a decrepit hotel and a restaurant. A flamboyant night club directly across the street named *The Mandarin* was plastered with posters of dancing girls. "You can't miss it," Chun said succinctly.

Hammit asked, "Has Han any way of keeping in contact with his men."

"Radio," Chun answered. "He came well-equipped.

"I'm going to move in," Hammit stated. "Once they get him inside, we're lost."

"A power play?"

"What choice do we have? I'll move in as close as I can while Wylie covers me. Our best chance is to surprise them when they get out of the car."

"Watch that jade shop," Chun admonished.

"I'm counting on you for that."

"We'll do what we can, but if Han has five or six men . . ."

The Chinese detective ceased speaking and glanced down the street. Finally he said, "You won't surprise them."

"It's a gamble," Hammit admitted.

"We'll have you covered."

"Move in fast when I grab the old man." Hammit eyed the shotgun squad waiting by the second car, then briefly instructed Wylie on what he was to do and started toward Ho Ming's jade shop. Night was lifting so that the dingy buildings fronting the street appeared ghostlike in the gray mist; doorways and alley openings were black rectangles. A curious silence pervaded the air, broken several times by the distant whistles of Star ferries that plied the bay between Hong Kong Island and Kowloon, on the mainland.

Hammit glided forward, hugging close to the buildings while scanning ahead and to the side. He sensed rather than heard Wylie following behind. Once or twice he glimpsed furtive figures on the opposite side of the street and knew they must be Chum's men. He felt grateful for their presence. Ahead, through the mist, he saw a garish splash of posters at the opposite side of the street and knew it must be *The Mandarin*.

He was still a score of yards from the jade shop when a car swung around the corner ahead of him and came in his direction. He clasped the automatic in his pocket and quickened his step, knowing this was it. He had no time to consider or plan, no time for anything but action. He had to get the old man alive!

He felt cold and absolutely calm.

The car swung to the curb ahead of him and two men piled from the back seat, yanking a third man out after them. The latter appeared old and very frail. One of the men swung menacingly toward Hammit, his hand in his pocket. He was Chinese, short and husky. As the distance between them narrowed to a few feet, Hammit yanked the automatic from his pocket and swung toward them.

"Hold it, don't move," he instructed crisply.

The Chinese facing Hammit stiffened and stood straighter. A shot crackled from the doorway of Ho Ming's jade shop and Hammit felt a searing pain in his back. He

lurched to stand erect. His finger tightened on the trigger and the face of the man in front of him exploded into a red mass. A second shot rang out and something bit Hammit's shoulder. His finger came back on the trigger again and the Chinese holding the old man began to crumple.

A fusillade of shots erupted, echoing hollowly along the street. Hammit heard a rush of feet, yells, the high crash of shotguns, the splintering of glass. The driver sprang from the car, a gun coughing in his hand. The old man's body jerked, then he sagged to his knees, swaying before he toppled backward. A gun barked behind Hammit and he felt the bullet whistle past his ear. The driver took a faltering step forward before plunging face down on the pavement.

"Down! Down!" Hammit knew the voice was Wylie's. It sounded very near. Several figures darted toward him from Ho Ming's jade shop. The shotguns crashed again and they went down. A shrill scream rent the air.

As the gun battle exploded around him in renewed fury, Hammit crawled to the old man's side. He grasped his thin shoulder and shook it. Suddenly the ancient eyes snapped open, staring upward into his face.

The agent leaned closer. "My name's Hammit," he exclaimed hoarsely. "Tell me what you know. You haven't much time."

"The river of time . . ." The old man attempted to raise his body, then slumped back, wheezing for breath. A scarlet stream gushed from his mouth, dripping down his shirt front.

"For God's sake, speak," Hammit urged desperately. He shook the frail shoulder again. The old man struggled to hold his eyes open and Hammit saw they were clouding over. "Hurry," he urged.

"My name is . . ."

"I know your name," he cut in. "Tell me what you know."

"The bomb," the old man murmured. He began speaking in a halting, scarcely audible voice. Hammit leaned closer, feeling his own strength waning as he listened to the incredible words that spilled brokenly from the educator's lips. The thin body jerked spasmodically.

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"It's time for me to go," the old man whispered. A strangling sound came from deep in his throat and suddenly he went limp.

"Wylie!" Hammit croaked the name, twisting his head to look around, at the same time aware of the unearthly stillness. A muffled burst of gunfire resounded from inside the jade shop, then the silence swept back, this time for good.

Feet pounded on the pavement and a figure loomed over him. He saw that it was the Englishman Limbrook. "Get Wylie," he gasped.

"They got Han—cleaned out the whole bunch," Limbrook said.

"Wylie, quick!"

"Agent Wylie is dead."

"Dead?" Hammit felt a quick sorrow.

"Chun's coming." Limbrook knelt and put a supporting arm behind Hammit's back as the agent fought to sit erect. "Take it easy," the Englishman encouraged.

Weak with pain and loss of blood, Hammit subsided against Limbrook's arm. A moment later Chun emerged from the jade shop and knelt at his side. A shaft of morning sun, rising above *The Mandarin* night club, splashed across the bodies near the curb.

"Chun, here's what you have to do," Hammit gasped. He fought to breathe, then began speaking. Chun's eyes were blank as he listened. Finished, Hammit looked up into the lieutenant's face. "Hurry," he whispered. He fell back against Limbrook's arm. He'd done all he could do. So had Chuck Wylie.

Now it was in other hands.

NINE

Time: 4:20 P.M., 10 July 1973.

Place: The White House.

GENERAL JAMES GUYER gazed wearily at the haggard faces around the long table in the Cabinet Room. His eyes took

in the stained coffee cups, littered ash trays and scattered papers before moving to CIA Director Martin Sankler, who a moment before hurriedly had entered the room and now was deeply engrossed in conversation with the President.

The latter's face was taut, strained, weary with the endless hours he'd put in since the destruction of the XMSV-1. Guyer well could understand his fatigue; his own hours had been a succession of nightmares. At the same time, he'd gotten a new appreciation for the Office held by the gaunt man at the head of the table; no burden could be more trying.

He moved his eyes restlessly. Since morning the President's ExComm—the Executive Committee of the National Security Council—had more than doubled in size. In addition to the original group, it now included Vice President Henry Oldfield, who had hurried back from his Arkansas farm; Attorney General Carlton Wood, Undersecretary of State Lloyd Milton, General Seymour Kane, the Army Chief of Staff, the House and Senate majority leaders, and several others.

Guyer early had noted that the Vice President was scarcely more than a figurehead. Old beyond his years, with a lined face and heavy jowls, he sat at the far end of the table, following rather than participating in the discussion. No one asked his advice, nor did he offer any. Not so the Attorney General or Senator Burton Townsend, the majority leader. Both were hawks, vociferous in their statements and charges. They stood poles apart from State Secretary Clayton Kimball and Defense Secretary General McCloud, both of whom strongly advocated caution. Undersecretary of State Lloyd Milton was in the latter camp. General Seymour Kane, the Army Chief of Staff, a lean, taciturn man with a hard, angular face, was prone to speak only when addressed; his answers were blunt and forthright.

What progress had they made? Guyer pondered the question. Despite the around-the-clock talks, nothing had changed except that the situation had grown more critical. More critical and more clouded, he corrected. The startling news that Foreign Minister Gomulka had acknowledged the bomb as Russian quickly had been followed by an even more startling call on the hot line from Chairman Chernychev.

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Russia had launched the bomb! Chairman Chernychev had admitted it; in the same breath he had disclaimed it, all the while pleading that the United States take no overt action that might precipitate nuclear war. He pledged peace. The message, strangely garbled, abruptly had been broken off. The President's immediate attempt to return the call had failed. The trouble was assigned to technical difficulties in the communication system at the Kremlin end. The net effect had been to precipitate an uproar among the Ex-Comm members.

It was still going on.

"It's a trick," Attorney General Carlton Wood asserted. "Once that statement from Gomulka leaked to the press . . ."

"We don't know that Gomulka made the statement," Secretary Kimball broke in heatedly.

The Attorney General placed his knuckles against the table and leaned forward. A vein at the side of his neck throbbed visibly. "Didn't Chernychev verify that?" he demanded "My impression from this conversation is that he did."

"He did and he didn't," the President interposed. "The message was quite garbled."

"Convenient," Senator Townsend remarked.

"I suspect the statement attributed to Gomulka was equally garbled," Secretary Kimball stated. "I can't see him making such a statement. It's simply not in character."

"What do we know about Gomulka's character?" the Attorney General challenged.

"What would Gomulka gain by such a statement?"

"Assume that it is true," the Attorney General responded. "If so, it would explain Chernychev's call."

"How is that?"

"Chernychev realized the cat was out of the bag. The call was an obvious attempt to forestall any action on our part," the Attorney General declared. "He's playing for time."

"Then he would have been better off to have denied it," Kimball retorted.

"Deny it when the world knows it's up there? He couldn't." The Attorney General laughed nastily and sat back in his chair.

"Carlton's right," Senator Townsend boomed. He rose from his chair, holding his pose until all eyes were centered on him. He reminded Guyer of a teamster boss. In any division between hawks and doves, the Senator would have to be counted as a leader of the former. The darling of the hardliners, the present controversy was tailored exactly to his liking.

The Senator cleared his throat and declared, "The presence of the bomb in our skies speaks for itself; it far outweighs anything that either Gomulka or Chernychev might have to say. Instead of sneaking missiles back into Cuba, they've hung them over our fair cities. That bomb is living proof of their perfidy, gentlemen. It is a living indictment of their foul scheme to conquer us, and the sooner we recognize it, the better off we'll be. The question is, what are we going to do about it?" He let his gaze rove around the table.

"We're trying to resolve that," the President commented.

"Time is running short, Mr. President."

"I'm aware of that, Senator."

"He could be pushing the button while we sit here."

"Yes, he could."

Guyer followed the argument closely. Throughout the long hours the doves had clung to their positions; so had the hawks. Only two or three of those present appeared willing to weigh events on the scale of logic: The President was one such. Admiral Philip Massey, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, was another.

In Guyer's own mind, it wasn't so much a matter of doves or hawks, but simply a question of which course of action to take. Yet, he thought irritably, it wasn't that simple; not when the world tottered on the brink of nuclear war. But the bomb was up there! That was a *fait accompli*, and the Senator was right: something had to be done, and soon.

Admiral Philip Massey raised his voice to be heard. "What did Chairman Chernychev mean by his reference to internal difficulties, Mr. President? Did he give any clue at all?"

The President returned Massey's gaze. "He didn't say, Phil. His words were almost incoherent."

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"Trickery," Senator Townsend snorted.

"Could that have been due to the translation?" asked Massey.

The President shook his head. "I'm certain that it was not. Leiberling's one of the best Russian interpreters in the Nation." He hesitated before continuing, "Leiberling's impression was that Chernychev desperately was trying to assure us while at the same time trying to mask the truth, or to protect his own position."

"Meaning what?" asked the Attorney General.

"The internal trouble might be more difficult than he'd care to acknowledge."

"Revolt?"

"Perhaps; but if so it hasn't reached the Kremlin. If it had, Chairman Chernychev certainly wouldn't have been on the phone."

"How do we know it was Chernychev?" demanded Senator Townsend.

"Voiceprints," the President answered succinctly.

"I still believe it's a trick," the Attorney General declared doggedly. "We should be taking action."

"What kind of action do you advocate, Carlton?" The room grew so still Guyer fancied he could hear his heart beat.

"I'd give him an ultimatum. If that bomb starts down . . ."

"We've already done that," the President cut in.

"I'd force him to destroy it, Mr. President. They certainly have some fail-safe control."

"We've speculated on that before, Carlton. We suspect they have but it's one of those things we've never really known for certain."

The Attorney General said stiffly, "An ultimatum based on the bomb's destruction should clarify that point."

"Perhaps the matter's out of Chernychev's hands," the President suggested.

"I can't believe that, Mr. President. Chernychev's still top dog. He wouldn't be on the hot line if he weren't. You said so yourself."

"That appears to be the situation in the Kremlin," the President acknowledged, "but it doesn't tell us much about

the rest of Russia. Personally, I'm inclined toward the belief that Chairman Chernychev is in deep trouble, and that he's trying to resolve it. We don't know that he has control of the bomb at all. I'm inclined to think not."

"Is that the assumption that we're going on—that Chernychev is guiltless?"

"I didn't say that," the President snapped testily.

"Where does that leave us?" Senator Townsend demanded truculently.

"We're attempting to ascertain that, Senator."

"I'll rephrase Carlton's question, Mr. President. Are we going to accept the word of the Chairman of the Communist Party?"

"We're accepting nothing," the President declared flatly.

Senator Townsend's voice rose. "As I understand it, Chernychev is attempting to switch our attention to a third party—a party who conveniently is unnamed and who, I have scant doubt, is but a figment of his imagination. The only truth we know is that the bomb is up there. Chernychev himself admitted that."

"It's up there," the President agreed.

"Above our fair cities, Mr. President."

"It's in orbit, if that's what you mean."

"Yes, of course, circling overhead until they decide to bring it down. I urge you to pin the blame where it belongs, Mr. President, right on the Chairman."

"There could be a third party," Admiral Massey suggested.

"Who?" Senator Townsend gazed balefully at him.

"Marshal Trofimuk, for one."

"That's quite possible," the President acknowledged. He looked inquiringly at his Secretary of State.

Kimball said slowly, "If an attempt has been made to remove Chairman Chernychev, I would suspect Trofimuk, yes."

"Wasn't he Anflov's man?" the Senator demanded.

"He rose to power under Anflov, yes."

"A Stalinist," the Senator snorted.

"That's a fair description," Kimball acceded.

The Senator asked sharply, "Does he control the Red Army?"

Kimball smiled wanly. "He exerts tremendous influence and undoubtedly commands the loyalty of large segments of it."

"Which segments?"

"I can't say with certainty."

"Seymour?" The President looked sharply at the Army Chief of Staff."

"He commands the artillery," General Kane answered.

"Artillery?"

"In Russia, all missiles come under the artillery," the General explained.

"ICBMs?" the Senator demanded disbelievingly.

"Yes, of course; it's a form of cannon." The General's voice was stiff.

"Does he control the garrison at Novaya Zemlya?"

"Yes, but not directly. He's at staff level."

"The commanding officer at Novaya Zemlya is a General Fyodor Borisov," the President interrupted. "Martin gave me his dossier a day or so ago."

"Borisov in the past has been an advocate of peace," Secretary Kimball said slowly.

"Peace?" The Senator stared at him. "He launched the bomb, didn't he?"

"We don't know that."

"He's the commanding officer, isn't he?" Senator Townsend switched his gaze to the President. "Isn't Novaya Zemlya a large ICBM base? I'm under the impression that it is."

"Twenty pads," the President answered shortly.

"Twenty? You mean they can launch twenty nuclear missiles, Mr. President?"

"That is our best estimate, Senator."

"My God, they could destroy the United States."

"A large part of it, certainly."

"And we're allowing that threat to continue" Senator Townsend leaned forward, gazing fixedly at the gaunt figure at the head of the table. "We should blast that base out of existence, Mr. President. We shouldn't delay one moment." His voice, sharp and decisive, brooked no ground for argument.

The President returned his look. "We're attempting to prevent an all-out nuclear war, not start one."

"If that base is in hostile hands?"

Guyer saw a strained look cross the President's face and surmised his thoughts. The problems appeared so clear-cut, so easily answered. Just push the button. Push it and hope; that's what the Senator was doing. But the more difficult way—the safer path—was to look at the problem in a historical perspective. Guyer prayed that the lessons of history hadn't been lost.

The President sat straighter and declared, "An ICBM attack on Novaya Zemlya is out of the question."

The Senator placed his palms flatly on the table and leaned forward. "May I ask why, Mr. President?"

The President answered with a trace of asperity, "Assume the base is in hostile hands, Senator. What would the base commander likely do if his radar detected an ICBM attack? He'd fire those missiles—all twenty of them."

"My God," someone murmured huskily.

Senator Townsend exclaimed peevishly, "There must be some way to counter that threat. Lord knows we've appropriated enough money."

"We have hopes." The President flashed a glance at Admiral Massey. "We're striving for a solution now."

Guyer raised his eyes. Overnight the room had been converted into a gigantic war room in which huge maps of each hemisphere covered the walls. He looked at the long finger of Novaya Zemlya pointing into the Arctic North—the short distance across the polar cap to the big cities of North America. They looked naked and helpless. But not quite, he thought hopefully. Somewhere beneath that sea of ice was the *Batfish*; he gave a silent prayer for its success.

He dropped his gaze. Six clocks had been aligned below the maps, each tagged with a different name. It was 4:40 P.M. in Washington, 9:40 P.M. in London, and 1:40 P.M. in Los Angeles. It was 12:40 A.M. in Moscow, 1:40 A.M. in Novaya Zemlya, and 5:40 A.M. in Peking; it was also a calendar day later in each of the latter three cities. The lights would be blazing in Moscow, he thought.

That was the state of affairs when the long afternoon dragged to an end and the group adjourned for supper. Guyer was rising to leave with the Chief of Staff when the President detained them with a glance. Drawing them to one side, he asked Admiral Massey, "Any report from the *Batfish*?"

"Not since I informed you last." Massey shook his head dourly.

"I'm hoping for something positive, Phil."

"Communications under the polar cap are very poor, Mr. President."

"I realize that."

"Captain Morley has been instructed to communicate at certain times via the satellite system, but it's a matter of locating a polynya at just the right moment."

"Polynya?" The President arched his eyes quizzically.

"A lagoon in the ice where they can raise the whip," Massey explained.

"My worry is the Russian counter-measures," the President observed. "Regardless of the situation in the Kremlin, Russian military leaders wouldn't tolerate one of our nuclear submarines in those waters."

"It's sticky," Massey agreed, "but I have every confidence in the *Batfish*'s captain. He's the best we have."

"Except that we don't know much about those waters, eh?"

"Navigating in the blind," Massey admitted.

"Let's hope, Phil." The President switched his gaze to General Guyer. "How's the plane coming, Jim?"

"Very well, Mr. President."

"On schedule?"

"Yes, sir." Guyer hesitated and then continued, "General Lampert hopes to have it spaceborne even earlier than predicted. He's working out orbits for that eventuality."

"How about the tests?"

"We'll have to test it in space," Guyer acknowledged.

"Isn't that extremely dangerous, Jim?"

"Yes, sir," he answered truthfully, "but we're giving it the best shakedown we can. We learned a lot from the XMSV-1."

"I can't say that I envy the pilot."

"Major Sam Kirby, Mr. President, and he's good. Sam's flown everything with wings."

The President put his hand on Guyer's shoulder. "I want you to give him my personal thanks and best wishes before he takes off, Jim. The Nation will owe him a great debt."

"Yes, sir, I'll do that," Guyer declared.

As the President left to join several members of his Cabinet, Massey said, "Thank God he's at the helm."

"Amen," Guyer returned.

During supper they listened to a blaring voice on the radio blast the administration for its failure to take immediate military steps to counter the threat of "Gomulka's bomb." The lack of action on the part of the government was termed "appeasement." Senator Burton Townsend was praised for his far-sightedness in predicting this attempt by Russia to subjugate the West. "The United States is face to face with another Cuba," the speaker declared.

"My God," Guyer exclaimed, "he could start a panic."

"We'll be lucky if we get off that easily," Massey countered.

"Do you really believe so?"

"I'd feel better if I knew whose finger was on the button."

Guyer put down his coffee cup. "Somehow I have the feeling we'll pull out of this."

"We have to believe that, Jim."

"We have a lot in our favor, given time," Guyer reflected.

"One helluva lot"—Massey smiled briefly—"given time."

Guyer eyed him, wondering how much time they did have. In somewhat over two days, or perhaps sooner, the bomb would reenter. If no signal were sent, it would come down in fiery self-destruction. But a signal would be sent; he knew that with certainty. The hand that had put the bomb into orbit would bring it down again on its mission of death. *Whose hand?* And why the delay? For what purpose was the finger withheld? If they knew the answers to those questions, their course of action would be clear.

They finished the meal in silence.

The President didn't come in until some time after the

committee had reconvened. He was carrying a late paper. He laid it face up on the table and sat down. RUSS ORBITAL BOMB SET TO DESTROY U.S.—Guyer's eyes fixed on the black headlines.

The President said quietly, "That what we're up against, gentlemen."

Secretary McCloud said, "You'll have to deny it, Mr. President. That could set off a sizable panic."

"We can't deny it, Gerald."

"No, we can't," Secretary Kimball affirmed.

"The American people don't panic that easily," the President observed. His gaze settled on Senator Townsend. "We've been through this before."

"You'll have to issue a statement," the Senator exclaimed.

"I have issued one. I acknowledged the existence of a strange satellite in orbit. I stated that it was being investigated. I further stated that I was in touch with Chairman Chernychev and we both were taking steps to prevent any incident which might lead to a nuclear exchange."

"That should be satisfactory," Secretary Kimball said placatingly.

"It'll have to do, Clayton."

"I've warned of this day repeatedly," Senator Townsend declared.

"Yes, I know." The President shoved the paper aside. When the stillness came again, he said, "We have other problems."

"I hope not as serious as the problem we've been considering, Mr. President," said Undersecretary Lloyd Milton. He laughed nervously.

The President allowed himself a slight smile. "The trouble in China is developing rapidly," he informed them.

"How?" McCloud asked quickly.

"Premier Tan Fu-chun is reported to have been banished from Peking."

"What's the significance?" asked Senator Townsend brusquely. "It seems to me they're always purging someone."

"The Premier was a strong voice for moderation," Secretary Kimball rebuked.

"He's a communist, isn't he?"

"Yes, of course." The Secretary's face showed his annoyance.

The President rapped sharply on the table and said, "There's more." As the hubbub subsided, he continued, "The CIA informs me that the President of Peking University is seeking asylum in Hong Kong."

"An educator?" the Senator snorted. "That's small fry."

"The CIA doesn't believe so."

"They're all clues," Secretary Kimball interrupted.

"Sounds more like a purge," Secretary McCloud commented. He edged forward in his seat. "Are these things connected with those Red Guard riots? The papers have been full of them for the last day or so."

"Those riots are staged," the Senator declared. "They always use them to cover up something."

"Exactly," the President cut in. "But what? That's what we have to determine."

"They could be connected with Premier Tan Fu-chun's banishment," Kimball conjectured. "It might be a hate campaign against him to make it stick."

"Was he that popular?" asked the Attorney General.

"Among the people, yes."

"Peng controls the power; that's what counts."

"I don't believe so," Kimball rebutted mildly. "The power always is residual in the people. That's why it's necessary to control them emotionally. Can you imagine what would happen if those eight hundred million people suddenly decided that the Premier was more important than Peng? Peng would disappear like that." He snapped his fingers.

"One other item," the President said. He looked at the faces around him and continued, "Peng Yi is reported to have executed his chief scientist."

"What's the significance?" demanded the Senator.

"He was the chief architect of China's atom bomb, or perhaps I should say hydrogen bomb. Ordinarily, he was the kind of man they can't afford to lose. The CIA dossier on him also shows that he was a student of the University president I mentioned."

"Well, something ties together," Undersecretary Milton exclaimed.

"If the report is true, it indicates serious internal difficulties," the President stated.

"Looks like one big ball of wax," McCloud offered.

"Possibly," the President assented. "There's scant doubt but that the Chinese are engaged in massive military maneuvers. We know something of what's going on but we don't know why. It's entirely possible that all these events are related."

Attorney General Carlton Wood raised his voice. "Are you indicating that these events might be tied to the Russian bomb, Mr. President?"

"It's worth a thought, Carlton." The President pursed his lips before continuing, "We also have reports of massive preparations for aerial activities."

"Aerial activities?" The voice was that of House Majority Leader Casper Chappell. Slight and gray, he raised his head with a curious birdlike movement. "I didn't know the Chinese had air power of any significance."

"One plane and one hydrogen bomb makes it significant, Casper."

"I'm certain they have more than one plane," Senator Townsend shot back.

"Jim?" The President looked inquiringly at General Guyer.

"They have quite limited aerial power," Guyer explained, aware of McCloud's frosty look. It wasn't the first time the President had bypassed the Defense Secretary on a technical question and McCloud didn't like it. Guyer continued, "Their aircraft are antiquated by modern standards, and, since the split with Russia, most of them have been grounded for lack of parts."

"Then they have no real air power? Is that correct?" asked Chappell. He riveted his eyes on Guyer.

"They probably have several hundred light and medium bombers of one type or another that could be put into the air."

"Large enough to carry the atom bomb?"

"Some, at least. Perhaps quite a few if they've managed to reduce the size of the bomb. Intelligence hasn't come up with that answer yet." A smile touched Guyer's lips. "We don't get much information of that type from China."

"Their range is extremely limited," Secretary McCloud interjected.

"Limited?" Chappell eyed him questioningly.

"As far as any threat to this Nation is concerned, yes."

"Not a direct threat, perhaps." Chappell's eyes settled on General Seymour Kane, the Army Chief of Staff. "You appear skeptical, General."

General Kane said sharply, "They could raise hell in Asia."

"They could do that," Guyer assented. He looked back at the President. "They could hit all of Southeast Asia, Burma, India and the bordering Russian provinces. Formosa would be a cinch." He gestured toward the wall map.

"If they could get through," McCloud interjected.

"We would expect some of them might get through," he answered.

Senator Townsend asked, "How about Japan and the Philippines?"

"We could stop them there," Secretary McCloud asserted. Looking at the President, he launched into a dissertation on American defenses in the Far East and the reasons why any offensive moves on the part of the Chinese were foredoomed. China was a nation that had nothing but people—"ill-fed, ill-clothed, ill-educated and ill-housed," he declared. China was a linguistic tiger, nothing more. He couldn't see that China's leaders would risk pitting their military against any major nation.

The ExComm members listened politely.

"*Nothing but people*"—the phrase stuck in Guyer's mind. As a point in fact, there were over eight hundred million of them; China was a nation bursting at the seams, hungry for the less-populated territories around her. He remembered the Chinese streaming down from the North in Korea; they had come like locusts, and yet that had been a bare trickle when compared with the reservoir that waited behind. If Peng Yi ever gave the signal . . . He shuddered.

Admiral Massey must have surmised something of what Guyer was thinking, for he lifted his eyes slightly, a look of irony on his face. Abruptly McCloud finished and settled back in his chair, his eyes still on the President. Guyer sensed he was waiting for approval.

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Finally the President nodded and switched his gaze to Secretary Kimball. "Who's the number two man on Peng's totem pole, Clayton?"

"Premier Tan Fu-chun, or he was." Kimball cocked his head quizzically.

"I was thinking of the military. Isn't it that general, Li Chi?"

"Yes, I would say so. Of course, the picture's clouded." Kimball amended.

"I'm certain that it is Li Chi," Admiral Massey interjected. "He's young, aggressive, and his power has increased tremendously during the last few years—power that I suspect might cause Chairman Peng Yi some perturbation."

"Is he that ambitious?"

"By all intelligence reports, yes."

"That's Sankler's view," the President conceded. Guyer caught the glimmer of an idea so audacious that momentarily it stunned him, and yet he knew that the same thought had underlain the President's questions. He wondered if it could have any connection with Chet Hammit's sudden flight to Hong Kong.

He returned his attention as Senator Townsend declared, "Mr. President, we still haven't related this to the bomb." His tone was aggrieved.

"No, we haven't," the President admitted.

"I think that's what we should talk about—the bomb. That's the immediate peril, Mr. President. As I get it, it's due to reenter within the next two or three days. That's correct, isn't it?"

"That's correct." The President sighed wearily and looked down at his notes.

Air Force Major Sam Kirby watched the blue light from the acetylene torches dance eerily against the walls and girders as he walked with Major General Joe Lampert through the factory of Westwood Aviation. The masked welders, their eyes fixed on the brilliant flames, reminded him of astronauts peering at their instruments high up in the cold of space. But with a difference; orbital space was deathly silent, in sharp contrast to the din around him.

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Bells, whistles, the whirl of metal saws and clank of machinery filled his ears.

Chad Jackman, their escort engineer, raised his voice to be heard. "We're ready to roll her out onto the ramp."

"You told us that yesterday," General Lampert replied dourly.

Jackman grinned easily. "We had a bit of trouble with the hydraulics, General, but she's ready now." They came to a walled area marked **RESTRICTED—AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY**; a guard at the door glanced at their badges and moved aside.

Kirby halted inside, studying the plane that all but filled the enclosure. For the last few days he'd lived with it, almost day and night, yet he never tired of looking at it. Somehow it reminded him of a larger version of the old F-106 interceptor, except that its belly was swollen where it contained the vital air compressors that enabled it to extract its food from the oxygen-laden air. Its variable swept wings, designed to be retracted as the plane drove faster and faster, would give it the appearance of an arrowhead as it blasted loose into orbit. The men clambering around it appeared as diminutive as gnomes.

Jackman broke the silence. "I could have wished for another week," he said wistfully. Kirby glanced sympathetically at him. As project engineer, Jackman was responsible for the aircraft's performance.

"We don't have a week," Lampert replied brusquely.

"I hate to rush these jobs," Jackman confessed. "There's always a few bugs."

"That's why you've been working around the clock, to make certain there isn't," Lampert countered. "Do you have doubts?"

"I believe she's ready."

"Sam?" The General looked at Kirby.

"I'm satisfied," he answered. "I've combed every inch of her, General, and we've tested her as thoroughly as we can—short of actual flight."

"What was the difficulty with the hydraulics?"

"A bug in the electronics. We corrected it."

Jackman's eyes grew curious. "It's probably none of my

business," he said, "but what's the big rush? I'd feel better if this baby were taxied up and down the strip and lifted off a few times before flying her to Edwards."

"You're right; it's none of your business," Lampert answered bluntly.

The engineer gulped and Kirby said, "I'll taxi her. I know the feel pretty much from the XMSV-1."

"I've been instructed to have her ready for flight today," Jackman offered. His voice sounded slightly puzzled.

"That's right," Kirby affirmed.

"Who's your copilot? I haven't seen him yet."

"I am," Lampert answered.

"You?" Jackman tried to hide his astonishment.

"I believe I'm qualified," Lampert replied dryly.

"Yes, of course," Jackman tried to hide his flush.

Kirby walked under the wing. He looked up at the big metal belly and the cowlings housing the combined turbo-ramjets that would drive her to more than five thousand miles per hour before the liquid hydrogen rockets cut in and boosted her to orbital speed. The bird breathed power.

Yes, he was satisfied, he thought. He knew every bracket, every pressure line and cable that had gone into her—every electrical, electronic, hydraulic, pneumatic and mechanical system. In his mind's eye, the bird was transformed into a vast three-dimensional blueprint; no secret was closed to him. He studied the wicked-looking rocket tubes that had been snugged close to the fuselage; the port housing the retractable neutron gun that could cause a passive pile to give off alpha radiation; another tube that contained special equipment Lampert had ordered. He checked and saw that all identification had been removed; even the small USAF and XMSV-2 which had appeared earlier on the side of the fuselage were gone.

Kirby heard a rumble and looked around. The big metal doors were rolling open and a shaft of sunlight came through, splashing across the big plane's metal body. Beyond he saw men servicing aircraft on the ramp.

He walked to the door and looked up into the sky. It was blue with a fleece of white clouds moving in from the

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west-blue and quiet and big. Turning, he saw General Lampert watching him quizzically.

"Does it give you a feeling, Sam?" the General asked softly.

"Yes," Kirby said, "it gives me a feeling."

TEN

Time: 0915 hours (GMT), 11 July 1973.

*Place: Aboard nuclear submarine Batfish
under the Arctic Ice.*

THE NUCLEAR SUBMARINE *Batfish* moved slowly through the Arctic depths, its steel bow pointed toward a destination lying some five hundred miles north by northwest of Novaya Zemlya.

Lieutenant Commander Carter Winn, the executive officer, straightened his tired body and intoned, "Ten minutes." He looked at his coffee mug and saw that it was empty.

Commander Kent Morley, the ship's captain, glanced at the chronometer and said, "The ice is thinning." He returned his attention to moving needles that traced the profile of the white roof above them. One needle, moving in a straight line, drew information from a depth gauge; the straight line indicated the surface water level. The second pen, operating from an upward-scanning sonar, plotted the profile of the underside of the ice; together, the two lines showed its shape and thickness. Moments before, the overhead ice had been more than twenty feet thick; now, the needle edged upward and Morley saw it thin to less than ten feet.

"We might luck out," Winn commented; and a moment later, "Nine minutes on the nose."

"Ice ahead; she's dipping deep," Chief Kelsey called from the sonar room.

"Right rudder . . . come about twenty degrees," Morley ordered.

"Right rudder . . . twenty degrees." The voice of Lieutenant Karsh, the Officer of the Deck, echoed in Morley's

ears. He sensed a slight change of force acting on his body as the rudder moved and the *Batfish* came onto a new course.

"Every time it begins to look good it gets worse," Winn observed.

"We can thank God we got out of the heavy stuff," Morley answered, wondering at his own patience. In nine minutes, less now, he had to have his transmission whip above the ice to send a coded report to the Commander-Submarines, and to receive instructions from a relay satellite which at that precise time would be speeding overhead. With the Nation at Red Alert One, he knew that his coded report most likely was far less important than the message he might receive.

What was happening? The question came unbidden to his mind as it had many times in the almost three days since he'd so abruptly been ordered back into the Arctic basin, then instructed to take up station just north of the great land mass of Russia itself. Was the world at war? Had the button been pushed? Just the thought gave him a cold sweat.

"Clear of the berg, Captain," Chief Kelsey called. "Deep water off the bows."

"Left rudder, come back on course," Morley instructed. He glanced at the fathometer and back at the moving needle; the ice was thinning again.

"We could poke a hole through it," Winn suggested.

"Not if we can help it." Morley pressed a button that activated a rotating driver's lamp on the sail and a second button that started a synchronized television camera. As a screen came to life, he caught the swirl of pale green water against an alabaster ceiling. The underside of the ice appeared like a fresco.

"Six minutes," Winn chanted.

Morley grasped the periscope handle and rotated it to follow the light beam. The underside of the ice took on the appearance of gray, scudding clouds; it was rough and uneven. The ice pens showed it to be less than four feet thick.

Morley considered his situation. He had two options: he could tilt the ship at an upward angle and fire a salvo of

torpedoes against the underside of the ice, or he could bring the *Batfish* up vertically, using the steel sail to punch a hole through the ice large enough to raise the transmission whip. Both had serious drawbacks. Using the sail as a ram could damage the periscopes, perhaps irrevocably; the torpedoes exploding against the ice would send shock waves through the water detectable for many miles. Of the two, the battering ram concept appeared the most favorable choice.

"Five minutes," Winn intoned.

"We'll break through," Morley decided.

"Stand by for a ram," Lieutenant Karsh sang out.

"Easy does it," Morley grunted. "Slacken off on the speed, bring her up vertically." Ordinarily a nuclear submarine was a creature of the deeps and had small use for periscopes. Nevertheless, he didn't want to lose them. With the *Batfish* in strange waters, he wanted every means at his command. He'd scarcely spoken when the alabaster ceiling overhead dissolved. He shot a fast look at the recording pens; the surface above them unexpectedly was clear.

"Polynya," he called. He rubbed his hands briskly and directed Lieutenant Karsh to bring the ship up slowly.

"The nick of time, just like an old-fashioned melodrama," Winn cracked.

"Melodrama I don't particularly care for," Morley remarked, thinking it the understatement of the year. For two days they'd played hide and seek under the ice with mysterious acoustical echoes that sonar had identified as a submarine. Morley had scant doubt but that it was one of the dreaded killer subs. Although his own torpedo crew had been standing by since the first alert, he realized that in any battle between two such undersea craft, the *Batfish* would be at a tremendous disadvantage. "Horseplayer's odds," Winn had called it.

In the *Batfish's* magazine were sixteen tubes extending from the keel to the top of her pressure hull. Each held a nuclear missile. Within scant minutes of a firing order, each missile could be launched from beneath the surface to a target many hundreds of miles away. The *Batfish* was designed to destroy nations; killer submarines were designed to destroy vessels like the *Batfish*. He carried the knowledge

with him grimly. They'd only shaken the strange craft a few hours before; the strain had been hellish. He marveled that Winn appeared as springy and debonair as ever.

The *Batfish* made a slow, vertical ascent.

"Up 'scope," Morley snapped. He swung the periscope around. The *Batfish* lay in a small lagoon, only a few times larger than the ship itself. It was hemmed in by brash and small heaps of turret ice. Small floebergs known as "growlers" floated around the vessel. Beyond the clear water, several larger bergs thrust icy fingers against a leaden sky. The sea in the polynya was choppy.

Lieutenant Taylor called down from the navigation room, "Can we push her up, take a look?"

"Not a chance," Morley snorted. He knew how the navigator felt. He'd like to step out on the bridge himself and get a sniff of cold air, see something of the white world around him, but it was too dangerous.

Lieutenant Taylor knew it, for he called back, "Nice try."

"Time?" Morley called.

"Two minutes on the mark," Winn responded; and following a brief pause: "Mark!"

Morley swung the scope around slowly to study the polynya and the stretches of ice beyond. It was a bleak, endless world, completely unpatterned. "All clear . . . brash and block ice," he called. "Raise the port whip."

"Aye, aye, Captain."

"Radar?"

"Scanning, Captain."

"Radio, transmit your message to the Commander-Submarines."

"Beginning transmission, sir."

"Sixty seconds to go," Winn called, after a brief pause.

"Sixty seconds," Morley repeated into the phones. He had a momentary vision of a satellite streaking down through the polar skies, its electromagnetic fingers stretched downward toward the receptor that protruded above the choppy surface of the polynya. Fantastic, he thought, and marveled at the idea. Yet, was it any more fantastic than the *Batfish* itself? He believed not.

Waiting, he sensed the ship around him. Men sat before

banks of lights and control levers in the attack center and nuclear power compartment; hands held other levers that operated the bow and stern planes, the rudder. Ears listened to the pinging of the sonars; eyes watched the navigation gyros and computers. And that was just a small part of it. From the engine room at the stern to the torpedo room at the bow, the *Batfish* was living, pulsating, an extension of the protoplasmic life that commanded her. She was a creature of response, not of thought.

"Message coming in, Captain," The voice from radio was high and clipped.

"Inform me the instant it ends."

"Aye, aye, sir."

"Time zero," Winn called. Morley didn't answer. Swinging the periscope slowly, he studied the undulating surface of the ice. It was not as smooth as he'd first supposed, but was jagged, ridged, hummocked. Here and there great slabs jutted upward at odd angles, pushed by the relentless pressures from the ice below. It was a constantly shifting, moving mass that occasionally rumbled and gave off sharp reports as bergs came into slow-motion collision or crushed the thinner surface ice between them; yet to the eye there was no motion whatever. It was a still world, painted white. Bleak, desolate—a great nothingness, he thought. Decades before, Admiral Peary had described the polar cap as a "trackless, colorless chaos of broken and heaved-up ice." Morley believed the description apt.

"Aircraft bearing one six five!" The voice from radar cracked in his ears. "Range ten thousand yards . . . six blips!"

"Flood negative!" Morley barked the command to fill the buoyancy control tank. "Down the port whipl!"

"Flood negative," Lieutenant Karsh called urgently. "Down the port whipl!" *Ooohpwahl! Ooohpwahl!* The diving alarm sounded piercingly.

"Flood negative!" The call came back through the speakers.

"Green board, sir." Voices echoed through the ship as each man leaped to his job. Morley sensed the familiar pulsing

throb as the *Batfish* responded to changes in ballast and power.

"Radio, did you receive all of the message?"

"We got the sign-off, Captain."

"Let's have it," he snapped. He felt the sudden build-up of air pressure as the diving officer vented the negative tank and tons of seawater poured into the emergency diving tank. He swiveled the scope as the *Batfish* surged underfoot and began descending vertically. Just before the water sloshed against the lens he glimpsed the planes storming toward him low over the ice. They appeared enormous. "Down 'scope," he instructed, wondering if the *Batfish* had been detected. It scarcely seemed possible.

For a long moment he was aware of all of the sounds of life around him—the whir of fans, click of solenoids, the steady pinging of the sonars. Sounds he seldom noticed suddenly seemed loud and harsh. Someone exhaled heavily.

"Two fathoms over the sail," Lieutenant Karsh called.

"Sonar?"

"No deep ice in the immediate vicinity, Captain."

"Take her down and ahead, half-speed. Keep a sharp watch, sonar."

"Aye, sir," Chief Kelsey responded.

A radioman delivered the message received from the communication satellite and Morley read it quickly. PROCEED TO ASSIGNED STATION XXX INSTRUCTIONS REMAIN THE SAME. It was signed by the Chief of Naval Operations. He folded the paper carefully and put it in his pocket. "No change," he told Winn briefly.

The executive officer grimaced. "We learned it the hard way."

"I don't believe they detected us."

Winn stroked his jaw. "There are not too many polynyas. I imagine they're keeping them charted and covered on the off chance of catching us napping. They know we're around."

"They almost did," Morley commented. "Those lagoons are constantly opening and closing. They'd be difficult to chart."

"They probably do it photographically, from high-flying aircraft."

"Good thinking," Morley acknowledged. That possibility already had occurred to him but he didn't say so. He glanced at the fathometer. The charts showed the sea fairly shallow at this latitude, but at the moment they had a good thirty fathoms under the keel and a comfortable margin above. He appreciated that.

"Ice ahead . . . one six zero zero yards," Chief Kelsey called.

"Very well."

"She's a deep berg, Captain."

"Come twenty degrees port and increase speed to two-thirds," Morley instructed Lieutenant Karsh. He returned his eyes to the ice pens while listening to the steady pinging of the sonar. The sonar was the ship's ears. Releasing 36-millisecond bursts of acoustic energy into the water from the transducer, it listened for the echoes, which appeared as spirals on the PPI screen.

He noticed that the ocean floor beneath him had changed in character, its relative smoothness giving way to narrow sea valleys and sharp peaked ridges.

Lieutenant Taylor, the navigator, called the change to his attention. "Highly unlike what's on the charts," he finished dryly.

"We're in a new world, Bill."

Chief Kelsey called urgently, "We've picked up an echo aft, Captain."

"Submarine?"

"No, sir, it's too small. It's from the polynya."

"Full speed ahead," he barked to Lieutenant Karsh. "How's the ice?"

"That berg's slipping past off the starboard bow . . . five hundred yards. I'm getting sound from the polynya, an active sonar of some type but it's damned small."

"Keep on it," Morley felt vaguely disturbed.

"Aye, aye, sir."

He started to speak, catching his voice as a dull roar came through the hull of the *Batfish*. The submarine trembled

momentarily. "Sonar?" he snapped, trying to grasp what had happened.

"An explosion of some sort . . ." Kelsey's words were chopped off as a second rumble ran through the ship.

"Sonar?" he yelled more urgently.

"Angle on the starboard bow eight three," Kelsey returned. "They're explosions of some sort, Captain. No blips except ice."

Morley swung toward Karsh and barked, "Left full rudder . . . flank speed."

"Left full rudder," Karsh echoed. The maneuvering room answered the flank speed call and the screws bit into the water.

Morley looked at Winn. "That was sonar the chief detected. They dropped listening gear through the polynya, now they're bombing through the ice for more drops."

"They can lead that killer sub right to us," Winn answered.

"If they can establish a plot." He cocked an ear, listening to the muted purring that emanated from the ship's nuclear power plant. It was really no noise at all but more of a whisper that filled the air. It reminded him of the rustle of leaves in an autumn wind.

Kelsey called, "We have a deep berg to starboard." He gave the range and bearing.

"Bring her to starboard around that berg," Morley barked to Lieutenant Karsh. "Place it between us and the polynya as soon as possible."

"If we guessed right, they have three sonars in the water," Winn observed.

"I realize that," Morley answered testily. He glanced at the electronic log. The speed needle showed the *Batfish* moving at better than eighteen knots coming into the turn. The depth gauge needle stood at 120 feet; the automatic writers showed an almost constant ice thickness of four feet. The sea floor was becoming increasingly uneven and broken.

WHAM! WHAM! Two tremendous explosions sounded above them and a strong vibration ran through the hull, shaking coffee cups and loose objects from their stands. The lights flickered.

"Rig ship for depth charges," Morley yelled.

"Depth charges?" a startled voice exclaimed.

"If they can blast holes for sonar drops they can blast them for depth charges," he snapped.

"Or homing missiles," Winn added tightly.

"God forbid," Morley replied. "Lieutenant Karsh, have the conning officers hold the course around that berg."

"Yes, sir."

"We've lost the polynya," Kelsey called from sonar. "The ice ridge is directly aft."

The silence swept back, broken only by the sounds of the ship's instruments. Listening, Morley was aware of the tension around him, not in the faces but in the air itself; the tension had come like an unbidden guest. When a long moment had passed, he rubbed his hands and instructed Lieutenant Karsh, "Come around to port, resume your course."

"I could wish for deeper water," Winn remarked.

"So could I."

"Plenty of ice ahead," Kelsey called. "It's dipping down in jagged ridges."

"How about the ocean floor?"

"Some peaks, Captain. Nothing up to our level yet."

Morley looked at the Officer of the Deck. "You heard that. Twist her through the ice."

"Yes, sir." Lieutenant Karsh passed instructions to the conning officers before returning his gaze to the Captain. His eyes were speculative. "Shall I maintain speed?"

Morley looked at the ice pens and fathometer. "For as long as possible. Stay as deep as you can."

"We're losing schedule," the executive officer remarked.

"We'll have to make it up." Morley sensed a sudden irritation. It was easy to draw a plot on a chart and say be there at a certain time. One sweep of the pencil did it. But the plot didn't consider ice, killer submarines or aircraft. Blasting holes through the ice and dropping sonar units, perhaps depth charges—it wasn't altogether what he'd anticipated this far from the Russian coastline. Neither had Winn.

The executive officer must have surmised his chain of thought, for he said, "The Russians are ice experts, Captain. We occasionally run under it but they live with it

all along their northern frontier. You can bet they've put one helluva lot of military thought into it."

Morley nodded, remembering the constant Russian exploration of the polar north as well as the open seas to the south. Many Russian fishing vessels and whalers were reputed to double as research vessels and, yes, intelligence units. The United States was hard put to launch a rocket but that a Russian ship wasn't lying offshore to observe.

"They've charted every inch of this area," Winn persisted. "It might be unknown to us but it's like the family parlor to them. God knows what kind of booby traps they have spread."

Morley smiled faintly. "What are you trying to tell me?"

"They can drop mines, depth charges and homing missiles through the ice, the same as they have the sonars. They can also lead that killer submarine right to us."

The depth charges offered the least danger. The holes blasted by the Russians to drop the charges would alert them. Mines were another matter. The *Batfish's* sonar could detect the float and water suspension types, but not the pressure mines that would lie half-buried in the silt. Such mines operated on the principles that an area of reduced pressure occurred under every ship in motion. The decrease in pressure caused by the passage of the *Batfish* over such a mine would trigger it. As for underwater homing missiles, they were pure murder. What to do about it was something else again. He said so.

"We should push north into deeper water."

"We haven't the time, Carter."

"We could travel at full speed on a straight course, if we were deep enough."

"Navigation says no. I've sampled them on that, Carter. We'd still have to turn southward on the final leg and make a slow run through the shallows."

"Shallows? That's a guess, from what I've seen of our charts."

"A wild guess," Morley agreed. "Personally I believe they'll concentrate on their sonars, try to set us up for an ambush."

"It's logical," Winn admitted. "They must have a good idea of our destination by now."

"Course, not destination," Morley corrected.

"The captain of that submarine will know this sea bottom like a book."

"We're at a great disadvantage."

"All of which is very disconcerting to a poor lieutenant senior grade who's looking on this as a career," Lieutenant Karsh commented. Morley laughed, feeling some of the tension drain from his body. At the same time he couldn't shake the feeling that they hadn't seen the last of the Russian submarine. As Winn gestured and cocked his head, Morley heard a low rumble come through the hull. The *Batfish* trembled gently.

"Sonar?"

"The same thing, Captain. Explosion bearing one two five."

"Keep sweeping."

"Sweepers, man your brooms," Kelsey sang back.

Morley brought the *Batfish* onto a new heading, one eye on the ice pens. The ceiling remained thin but now and then great ridges extended sharply downward, giving him the impression of rushing through a dark cavern heavy with stalactites. Another dull thud came, and then a third. While sonar fed him the bearings, he brought the *Batfish* on a new course, running deep with less than eight fathoms of water under the hull.

The silence returned, and with it a tension that fairly crackled in the air. Lieutenant Karsh twisted the ship through the ice, and several times altered course to avoid peaks that jutted sharply from the ocean floor. At other times they crossed canyons in which the sea bottom abruptly dropped away for several hundred feet.

As the *Batfish* sped through the night of the polar sea, a new series of dull thuds came from explosions far off their port bow. Seconds later other explosions came from almost directly ahead, followed by dull thuds from starboard.

"Trying to bracket us," Winn commented. Sonar fed Morley the bearings and he brought the *Batfish* about again, running deep with less than ten feet of water under the keel.

Haunted by the specter of passing time, he resisted the impulse to lower their speed. For a short while they ran in silence, then an explosion close in off the starboard bow shook the ship from stem to stern.

"Come port full rudder," Morley snapped. He wiped a film of sweat from his forehead.

"Port full rudder," came the call through the speakers. As Morley felt the *Batfish* swinging onto the new heading, Chief Kelsey yelled, "Big bergs ahead. They're humdingers, Captain."

"Range?"

"Two five zero zero yards."

"Keep a sharp eye, Chief." Morley made a course correction, reluctantly dropping speed to one-half, then finally to one-third as the ice thickened and the sea bottom reached up with rocky fingers. Listening to the hum and click and whisper of the instruments around him, he tried to assess the Russians' probable moves, but finally gave up; he was in an unknown sea facing unknown weapons. The situation simply wasn't predictable.

From time to time sonar reported distant explosions. Winn suggested that perhaps they were used to signal the Russian submarine.

The *Batfish* was moving at increased speed again when Chief Kelsey reported a myriad of strange echoes from far ahead. Morley was in the act of ordering a change in course when sonar identified them as the voices of the sea itself—walruses, seals, or large fish schools that returned weird readings on the instruments.

The sea bottom commenced to fall away and at the same time new ice loomed ahead. The *Batfish* dropped into deeper water and increased speed. Morley changed heading to bring the ship back toward its destination; then for long moments they ran in silence.

"Maybe we've whipped it," Lieutenant Karsh finally offered. Morley shook his head and watched the fathometer, hoping for a deep trough running in the right direction. Instead, he got peaks and was forced to change course several times. Glancing at the chronometer, he realized that very shortly they'd have to break into the open for a top-speed

run if they were to arrive on station on time. That they might not was galling.

"Sonar contact!" Chief Kelsey's voice crackled through the speaker. "Fast screws, Captain, bearing one two five. Range four five zero zero yards."

"Submarine?"

"That's their signature. We lost them behind the ice almost as soon as we got them, but it was the same baby, Captain."

"Report the ice," he snapped.

"Clear ahead but big bergs to starboard." He gave the range and bearing.

Morley considered quickly. He wasn't at all certain that the *Batfish* could outrun the killer submarine, much less its torpedoes, but he really had very little information to go on. If it were anything like an American killer sub, the *Batfish* was dead. The executive officer realized that fact. His eyes held a feral glow.

Morley asked, "Can we squeeze under the starboard ice?"

"It would be tight, Captain. The floor's uneven."

"Yes or no," Morley snapped tightly.

"Yes, I believe so, Captain."

Morley swung toward Lieutenant Karsh. "Come to starboard. Slacken speed to dead slow. We're going to squeeze under that mass."

"Yes, sir." Lieutenant Karsh sounded strangely calm as he relayed the orders to the conning officers and engine room. Sonar called out the range in a steady flow; fathometer reports came in fast succession. The executive officer coordinated the course, speed, depth and sonar data, speaking steadily while Morley watched the ice pens move over the graph paper. The pen recording the bottom of the ice profile swooped down and down and the ocean floor rose until he thought that ice and sea bottom would come together. He blinked, realizing that it was an illusion of the mind rather than reality; but the space was damned close all the same.

"We're slipping through a crack under a door," Winn said quietly. For a moment there was a deathly silence, broken

only by the low wind sound from the reactors and the ping-ing from the sonars.

Morley watched the ice pens at rigid attention. The recording pen had nearly reached the reference line that indicated the top of the sail; almost, but not quite. He wanted to switch on the driver's lamp and underwater television but stifled the impulse. He knew they were in a *cul de sac*—the *Batfish* couldn't back down, couldn't turn; the only escape lay in that thin shadowland between the ice and the ocean floor. He wiped his forehead again.

"Sonar contact dead astern," Kelsey called. "Range four zero zero zero yards." Morley took the information calmly, realizing that for the moment there was nothing he could do. Absolutely nothing.

"Torpedoes, Captain." Kelsey's voice rose an octave. "One fish;" and a few seconds later, "two fish." As he spoke, Morley saw the recording pen dip slightly, almost touch the top of the sail while at the same time they had less than one fathom of water under the keel. He sucked in his breath sharply as the pen jiggled in that position, then began to rise.

"Increase speed to one-third, stand by on the bow planes," he ordered.

"The screws have speeded up, Captain!" Kelsey's voice rose with each word.

The pen continued upward and Morley called, "Bring her up twenty degrees."

"Up . . . twenty degrees," Karsh instructed.

"Increase speed to one-half."

"We're losing those fish," Kelsey called excitedly. Morley nodded slightly, feeling the deck tilt gently as the *Batfish* began angling upward at increasing speed.

"Level her off at fifty-five feet.

A tremendous roaring concussion shook the vessel as the first torpedo struck the ice ridge behind them. He heard the crash of shattered glass, followed by the sound of the second torpedo exploding. The lights flickered and came back on bright.

"That's what I mean by melodrama," Winn exclaimed in an unnaturally loud voice.

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"We just got the girl off the railroad tracks," he agreed. "Chief, how long is that ice ridge?"

"It extends beyond range to starboard, about three five zero zero yards to port, Captain. She's a lulu." Kelsey's voice was gay with relief.

"Come about to port," Morley ordered. "Lieutenant Corby?"

"Standing by," Corby reported from the torpedo room.

"Make ready your tubes."

"Depth setting?"

Morley hesitated. "Sixty feet. That might change."

"Tubes ready forward," Lieutenant Corby reported.

"Sonar?"

"Aye, aye, Captain."

"How far to the end of the ridge?"

"Two nine zero zero yards, Captain."

"Keep sweeping aft, Chief."

"Nothing back there but ice, Captain."

"Slacken speed to dead slow; hold your depth," Morley barked to Lieutenant Karsh. He looked at Winn. "I hope to God I'm guessing right."

"I believe you are," Winn answered slowly. "Only a maniac would try to follow us under that ice."

"That could be less than complimentary," he answered dryly.

"No, sir, there was no other way."

Morley watched him steadily. "I don't know that we're at war, Carter." He spoke, feeling the burden of command, acutely aware that there was no one to whom he could appeal. It was his decision, his alone.

Winn didn't evade the answer. "We're at war down here, Captain."

"Yes, we are." Morley silently made his decision and prayed he was right. Although he didn't know the extent of the stakes, he knew the Nation was—or had been—at Red Alert One, and that his simple, straightforward orders were to penetrate to a station deep in Russian waters by a certain time. *Regardless of the cost*—that was implicit in the orders.

He fell silent, listening to the play of conversation around him. Snatches came over the phones and through the speak-

ers; voices spoke low, hurriedly, accompanied by the ping and hum and click of instruments, the movements of bodies.

His decision was right! He suddenly knew it, not from anything in the situation that had changed, but from a deep reservoir of knowledge and instinct which subconsciously he had been tapping. He knew it, just like he knew the killer submarine at that moment was racing around the end of the ice ridge to pick up the trail of the *Batfish*. He stood straighter.

"Match gyro!" The torpedo data computer operator cut in the gyro regulator for the forward torpedo room; a voice check ensured that the attack angle transmitted actually was being reproduced at the tubes.

"Standby forward!"

"Forward torpedo tubes at the ready!"

"Radar contact dead ahead," Chief Kelsey called calmly. "Range one six zero zero yards. She's our pigeon, Captain."

"Standby to fire," Morley called tersely into the phones.

"Standby to fire!" The echo rang throughout the ship. Morley mentally drew the scene caught by the sonar's ping-pong echoes—a sleek steel hull racing swiftly through the dark waters around the end of the berg, just as he had known it would.

Sonar called the range, bearing and speed in a continuous chant. The data was fed into the TDC and plot.

"Set . . . set . . . set," the TDC operator called.

"Continuous bearing," Kelsey intoned.

"Depth?"

"Straight and level."

"Forward torpedoes ready to fire," Lieutenant Corby called.

"Fire one!" Morley felt a slight vibration run through the *Batfish* as the first torpedo sped on its way.

"One away, Captain!"

A heavy silence followed before he called, "Fire two!"

The tremor came again. *"Two away, Captain."*

"Check fire!"

"On target," Chief Kelsey responded. A deep silence followed and Morley saw the faces around him frozen in anticipation. Lieutenant Karsh stood with his head thrown back, his lips parted. Winn held an intent, listening attitude.

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Wham! A tremendous explosion came from ahead, shaking the *Batfish*.

"On the button! On the button!" Chief Kelsey yelled.

"Wait!" Morley gestured for silence and began counting. He'd reached the count of nine when the second explosion came.

"Good old *Batfish*!" a voice shouted jubilantly. A cheer arose, sweeping through the ship.

Morley looked at Winn. "We guessed right."

"Somebody was watching out for us," Winn answered simply.

"Navigator?" Morley bellowed.

"Aye, aye, Captain."

"Get out your plotting board, Bill. We have to get somewhere fast."

"She's already plotted, Captain."

"Plotted?" He sensed a faint surprise.

"It's been rather quiet back here lately so I took advantage of the time," Lieutenant Taylor explained.

Morley chuckled, feeling all at once better. "Mr. Wolfe?" He raised his voice in the tube, calling the engineering officer. "Stand by for full speed ahead!"

ELEVEN

Time: 8:10 P.M., 11 July 1973.

Place: The White House.

GENERAL JAMES GUYER contained his excitement as he entered the Cabinet Room. The President's ExComm had adjourned on a standby basis scarcely an hour before, following a day-long session, now hurriedly was summoned back into conference. *What had happened?*

He headed for the seat next to Admiral Philip Massey, noting that he was one of the earliest to arrive. The Attorney General and Undersecretary of State Lloyd Milton sat silently several chairs apart, the former doodling listlessly on a pad. He had a long, narrow face and a protruding lower lip that gave him a petulant expression. Ed Palmer, the

President's security aide, sat alone near the head of the table, head thrown back and eyes closed. Guyer thought he looked beat. Farther down, Senator Townsend was closeted deep in conversation with wispy Casper Chappell, the House Majority Leader. The latter, mostly listening, from time to time bobbed his head with quick, nervous movements that reminded Guyer of a sparrow.

Guyer slipped into the seat next to Admiral Massey. "No rest for the wicked, Phil. What's up?"

"No idea, Jim." Massey shook his head. The gray eyes under the shaggy brows held a quizzical look. "Let's hope it's on the good side."

"The tide's bound to turn," he answered with forced cheerfulness.

"It can't ebb forever." They glanced toward the door as Defense Secretary McCloud entered, appearing tired and worn. His face was creased in harassed lines. He nodded briefly and dropped into his usual seat, rustling in his pocket for his tobacco. Guyer felt a quick sympathy for him. Whatever his shortcomings, he was sincere in his beliefs, had the nation's best interests at heart. He had never doubted that.

General Kane, the Army Chief of Staff, came in briskly and sat down, glancing around to see who was present. He had a hard-bitten, taciturn face. He exchanged a few words with Guyer and Massey before sitting back, wrapped in his own thoughts. The remainder of the committee began straggling in by ones and twos.

Waiting, Guyer felt the tension build around him. It was there in the low, quick voices, the strained faces, fingers that tapped restlessly against the table or fumbled with cigars, eyes that hovered nervously on the door, asking: *Where is the President?* Nor was he free of the tension himself. It lay inside him, a deep, urgent pressure that demanded action; he felt frustrated because there was nothing he could do.

Doctor Darius Thornhill, the President's science advisor, came in, peering owlishly around as he made his way to his chair. Tall, thin and slightly stooped, his long face wore a lugubrious expression; by reputation, he stood high in the Nation's hierarchy of scientists.

Guyer returned to his private thoughts. With the press and radio screaming distorted versions of what was happening, or what they conjectured was happening, a restless sense of urgency swept the nation. *Do something! Do something!* A cry for action rose from the grass roots, rapidly becoming a thunder. The President's press statements had been simple and forthright, circumscribed only by security requirements; yet each statement was blown up out of all proportion—analyzed, interpreted and misinterpreted in the light of various political beliefs. *The President was bowing to Moscow . . . was standing firm . . . was risking nuclear destruction;* pro and con the voices clamored.

The foment extended beyond American shores. NATO was at alert; England held her bombers in the sky; Sweden, Norway, Egypt, Turkey—men were marching everywhere. China was massing, threatening, a giant awakened. The whole damned world was in an uproar, he reflected. London, Paris, Berlin, Tokyo—a wild wind was blowing, rising to an emotional gale; with it all reason had been swept away. Except here, he thought. Here, at least, the President was demanding logic, and most of those present were attempting to supply it. But my God, where would it end?

"*The President!*" someone called. Chairs hurriedly were pushed back as those present rose. The President came through the doorway with State Secretary Clayton Kimball and motioned them down with a gesture. Guyer subsided back into his chair with the distinct impression that the President was more relaxed. So was Secretary Kimball. A faint hope surged within him.

The Secretary of State left the President's side and went to his own chair, fussing with some papers as he sat down. The look of harassment and perturbation he'd worn for the last few days were gone; now he merely appeared tired.

The President took his place at the head of the table. Glancing around, he sat down and leaned forward, his hands clasped loosely together. The feeling that he was more relaxed came more strongly than ever to Guyer. Something's happened, he surmised, aware of the air of expectancy around him. The silence grew so absolute that he almost expected to hear it crackle.

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Clearing his throat, the President announced, "For the last thirty minutes I've been in conversation with Chairman Chernychev." He leaned farther forward, tilted his chin in a characteristic gesture, then dropped the bombshell: "Marshal Trofimuk has been executed."

"Executed?" someone exclaimed.

A hubbub arose and as quickly died as the President gestured for silence. "That is the word Chairman Chernychev used, or the Russian equivalent," he acknowledged.

"Then it's true; he tried to overthrow the Russian government?" asked Attorney General Carlton Wood.

"An abortive attempt."

"How about the bomb?" asked Senator Townsend. He spoke impatiently. "Where does that leave us?"

"I say, not with complete confidence, but with high hopes, that the fear is past."

"May I ask on what those hopes are based, Mr. President?"

"You may, Senator." The President fixed him with a stare. "Marshal Trofimuk attempted to bring the orbital warhead into reentry and failed."

"Failed?" The Senator arched his eyes.

"It didn't respond to the programmed commands."

"A dud?"

"Something went wrong. Whatever the case, it was that which caused the Marshal's downfall. It was his trump; he was using it to force the Chairman out. When it failed, troops loyal to Chernychev moved in fast. He didn't give explicit details but I have a picture of what must have happened."

"How about the ICBM base?" the Senator demanded. "Didn't Trofimuk command that?"

"He thought so." A smile touched the President's lips. "Apparently his orders to launch the missile were disregarded."

"Then the bomb will destroy itself in reentry?"

"That is our hope, yes."

"Hope?"

"It appears predestined, Senator."

"We should go up there, knock that damned thing down."

I understand we're getting ready to do that." The Senator glanced at Guyer.

"Jim?" the President asked quietly.

"General Lampert expects the XMSV-2 to be ready for space by early morning, Mr. President." Guyer hesitated before continuing, "It will be untested, of course."

"We can't avoid that."

"General Lampert has fullest confidence in the mission's success, sir, and so do I."

"I have every faith that you're right, Jim."

"All this leaves a big question, Mr. President," Senator Townsend interjected. "If the commander were Trofimuk's boy, how come he didn't launch his missiles at Trofimuk's orders? That part doesn't make sense."

"Perhaps he figured the jig was up when the warhead didn't reenter," the President suggested.

"But the base is in rebel hands, isn't it? That's what I'm trying to ascertain."

"There's no doubt of it, Senator."

"Then how do we know he won't fire his missiles?"

"We don't, Senator."

"Then what . . . ?" the Attorney General began, when the President waved him to silence.

"The Russian Government has had no contact with Novaya Zemlya," he explained soberly.

"Then how the devil do they know what's going on?" demanded Senator Townsend.

"They don't, Senator. Chairman Chernychev was quite clear on that point."

"They could blast them with their own ICBM's, at least if they were above board about this," the Senator declared.

A look of annoyance crossed the President's face. "The base commander would detect such an attack, Senator. His response would be to launch his own attack. We've discussed that point before."

"That man could be pushing the button right at this instant, Mr. President."

"Yes, he could."

"We must take some action," the Attorney General declared. His eyes fixed the President accusingly.

"Let's not rush," a voice counseled. Listening, Guyer felt a great bafflement. Even with the danger from orbit over, the peril remained as great as ever. What difference did it make whether you died under an orbital warhead or one launched as a conventional ICBM? Death was death, and it remained unbidden by the door. He glanced sideways at the Admiral; the gray eyes under the shaggy brows were expressionless.

Defense Secretary McCloud broke the brief silence. "Under the circumstances, I feel we're doing all we can, Mr. President."

The President nodded and began speaking. His voice was low and measured. The Kremlin had done its best to establish communications with Novaya Zemlya, he explained. It was Chairman Chernychev's opinion that when the coup failed, the base commander knew he faced certain execution should he surrender. At the same time, he'd fare no better should he launch his missiles. Chairman Chernychev believed, the President said, that the base commander would use the threat of launching the missiles to force an amnesty.

Finished, he glanced slowly around the table. Guyer had the distinct impression that the President wasn't altogether sold on Chernychev's theory. The voice had been that of a man relating what he'd heard rather than what he believed.

Defense Secretary McCloud asked, "Then they have no fail-safe procedures?"

"Apparently not, Gerald, or they've been circumvented."

"Mr. President, why doesn't Chernychev offer such an amnesty?" Attorney General Carlton Wood interrupted.

Guyer tilted his head sharply. The question was more that of the dove than the hawk. The President peered quizzically at the Attorney General. "Would we make such an offer under the same circumstances?" he asked. "Suppose one of our commanders seized control of an ICBM base, used it to blackmail us?"

"It couldn't happen, Mr. President. Not with our fail-safe procedures."

"You're dodging the point, Carlton." The President moved his eyes away and continued, "However, Chairman Cherny-

chev did make such an offer. He considered it the smallest price he could pay."

"The commander didn't respond?" asked the Senator.

"Not yet."

"That situation can't be allowed to continue, Mr. President. What's Chernychev going to do about it?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?" the Senator asked incredulously.

"Not without a great deal of consideration, Senator." The President grimaced wryly. "Twenty ICBM's pointed down your throat offer a prime deterrent."

"Pointed down whose throat, Mr. President?" Representative Casper Chappell's voice rose pipingly. "We'd be the target, wouldn't we?"

"I have scant doubt of that, Casper."

"My God," a voice exclaimed in awe.

Senator Townsend rose from the table. "Mr. President?" he asked imperiously.

"You have the floor, Senator."

"Isn't that why Chernychev's procrastinating on taking action? His claim that the base is in rebel hands seems like a very convenient arrangement to me. Those missiles are fired, and half of this nation is destroyed and he's relieved of the guilt. Isn't that the true situation?"

"Not one bit," the President admonished sternly.

"This seems to me like the typical Communist gambit, Mr. President. How long are we to continue taking Chernychev's word—the word of a Communist?"

"We are taking no one's word, Senator."

"But you said . . ." The Senator ceased speaking as the President gestured impatiently.

"I've reported the situation as Chairman Chernychev told it to me," the President said. Guyer could see that he was straining to keep his voice level. "However, he's not relieved of any responsibility for any actions taken by the base commander. I made that clear. Any attack whatever will bring immediate and total retaliation. The Chairman understands that."

"Total nuclear war?"

"Total nuclear war," the President affirmed.

"That puts the situation squarely in the hands of the base commander," Representative Chappell's reedy voice interrupted. "My God, let's hope he's not a madman!"

"The situation's not completely hopeless, Casper." The statement evoked a quick silence. The President continued, "I've proposed a possible solution to the Chairman."

"Solution?" a voice asked quickly.

"I've proposed that we destroy the base."

"Can we do that, Mr. President?" Representative Chappell's voice sounded ready and shrill. "Have we the means?"

"I believe we have, Casper."

"Nuclear submarines?"

"That is what we have in mind," the President affirmed. He glanced at the faces around him. "That information must remain in this room."

"Mr. President, how long would it take to get such a submarine on station," asked Senator Townsend. "We have very little time to act."

"We have a submarine proceeding on station now, Senator."

"Into Russian waters?"

"Yes, certainly."

"This is a new wrinkle, Mr. President." The Senator's voice held an accusing note.

"Not exactly," the President rebutted dryly. "After all, we are on *Red Alert One*."

The Senator fixed his eyes on Admiral Massey. "What assurance do we have that the strike will be successful? It seems to me that we're putting all our eggs in one basket."

"We are," the Admiral returned calmly.

"Just one submarine?"

"Just one, Senator."

"Why just one, Admiral?"

Massey brought up his head, staring at his questioner from under shaggy brows. "I'm not standing before one of your committees, Senator."

"I'm not attempting an inquisition," Senator Townsend snapped angrily. "I'm attempting to assess the degree of confidence we can have in such a move."

"One hundred percent," Massey replied quietly.

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"I don't believe we need to concern ourselves with the tactical end of this," the President interrupted. "I have complete confidence on that score."

"We all have, I'm certain," the Senator said, "but the more we know, the better we understand."

"Mr. President?"

The President switched his gaze to the Attorney General. "Yes, Carlton?"

"Won't the commander of that base detect the attack, retaliate before he's destroyed? I'm under the impression we believed he would."

"The nuclear strike would be from short range," the President explained. He glanced at the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs for confirmation.

"Before he can react, it'll all be over," Massey acknowledged soberly.

"Don't they have hard silos?"

Massey smiled bleakly. "Not that hard."

"I have one other question, Mr. President." The Attorney General switched his eyes to the Chief Executive. "If the base can be destroyed by a nuclear submarine, why don't the Russians use one of their own? Why do we have to be implicated in their dirty work?"

"A good question, Carlton." The President cleared his throat and continued, "I brought up that point with the Chairman. He stated that no Russian submarines were sufficiently close to reach a firing station on time, even though we know they have submarine bases in the East Siberian and Laptev Seas. He seemed rather evasive. I suspect the truth of the matter is that the Russian missile-launching submarine isn't as efficient as we've been led to believe."

"Our intelligence figures show over five hundred Red submarines," Senator Townsend interrupted.

"Mostly conventional, I suspect, or at least not up to our Polaris and Poseidon submarines."

"Then Chernychev agreed to our destruction of the base? You didn't mention that, Mr. President."

"He agreed with qualifications, Senator."

"Qualifications?"

"He insisted that the destruction of Novaya Zemlya be officially recorded as an atomic accident."

"That's entirely reasonable," State Secretary Kimball hastily broke in. "Russia couldn't allow the destruction of one of her ICBM bases by a foreign power, regardless of circumstances."

"Keep a story of that magnitude mum? Nonsense," snorted the Senator. "It'll be all over the globe before the echoes die away. You can't hide a thing like that."

"It's the official version that counts," Kimball explained. "It's a matter of face."

"Worry about Chernychev's face?"

"We're worried about the base," the President snapped testily. "We'd risk nuclear war attacking it without the Kremlin's sanction. It's that simple, Senator."

"Then attack it, by all means," the Senator responded with a flourish. "I've been advocating action like that for years."

CIA Director Martin Sankler entered hurriedly and went directly to the President's side, bending to whisper in his ear. The President stiffened; he tilted his head to hear better. Guyer felt suddenly perturbed. A rustle ran through the room. The President rose abruptly and walked with the CIA Director to the far wall, conversing with him in low tones. *What now?* A dozen possibilities flooded Guyer's mind, all of them ominous. He glanced uneasily at Massey. The Admiral was watching the proceedings grimly.

The whispered conversation abruptly terminated and the President turned back toward his chair. The CIA Director left the room. The President sat down, visibly perturbed. Watching him, Guyer felt the surge of his own emotions.

The President said simply, "Martin brought disturbing news."

"What is it, Mr. President?" Representative Chappell asked anxiously. His reedy voice reminded Guyer of the high notes of a flute.

"Apparently we've been looking the wrong way," the President confessed. "Marshal Trofimuk didn't control the bomb, nor Novaya Zemlya, I might add."

"Chernychev?" Senator Townsend half-rose from his chair.

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The President shook his head. "China, Senator."

"China!" The Senator exclaimed incredulously.

"Control of both weapon systems was transferred to Peking—to Chairman Peng Yi, to be precise."

"Is that another red herring?" demanded the Senator.

"I'm afraid not." The President shook his head. "Apparently Marshal Trofimuk was a dupe for a pro-Chinese group."

"May I ask the source of that information, Mr. President?"

"CIA sources in Hong Kong, Senator. You might recall mention of a Dr. Lu Sing Kai, the educator who fled . . ."

"I recall," Senator Townsend interrupted impatiently.

"Our men got to him," the President continued. "One of our top agents was slain, another critically wounded, but they got the story, and I have scant doubt but that it's true. It ties together the basic facts as we know them."

"We ought to fly that man here, Mr. President; get his story first-hand."

"Dr. Lu Sing Kai? He died in the same gun battle, Senator."

"Did he give the source of his information? That seems a strange bit of knowledge to fall into the hands of a mere educator. Even so, why would he bring it to us?" The Senator shook his head. "I smell something fishy."

"Sankler's dossier shows he was educated in the West, including Cal-Tech and the University of California in this country. That could have something to do with it," the President conjectured. "He got his information from Peng Yi's chief scientist, the one who was executed. The pieces fit together."

"We could blow China off the map, Mr. President."

"Yes, we could; we could blot out four or five hundred million Chinese at perhaps the cost of seventy or eighty million Americans, Senator. Those statistics frighten me."

"We should give him an ultimatum, the same as we did Chernychev."

"Perhaps, but I expect that we shall be receiving one."

"From China?" The Senator snorted skeptically.

"It's reasonable. He has good bargaining power."

"Bargaining power? What bargaining power, Mr. President? This Nation has the mightiest military machine in

the world. We could reduce China to dust. What does Peng Yi have?"

"A sense of destiny," Secretary Kimball broke in.

"Destiny?" The Senator swung toward him with an annoyed look. "I was speaking about weapon systems."

"In a sense, so was I."

"I don't understand your meaning," Senator Townsend snapped. "I don't understand it at all."

"I know," the Secretary acknowledged wearily.

The ultimatum reached the Secretary of State through the neutral Swiss Government at 11:00 P.M. that night. Ten minutes later it was on the President's desk.

At 12:15 A.M., the President revealed China's terms to the hastily assembled members of his ExComm: Within twenty-four hours the United States must pledge before the world to immediately withdraw all troops and military equipment from Southeast Asia; it must pledge to cease and forego, for all time, all military, technical, economic and cultural aid to all nations lying within the "Asian Sphere." Defined in terms of latitude and longitude, this included all territory even remotely Asian, the President informed them.

In turn, China promised to abstain from a declaration of war, and to allow the thermonuclear warhead, then in orbit, to destroy itself. Failure of the United States to agree to those terms within twenty-four hours would be cause for military action on China's part in defense of her rightful sovereignty.

As the President ceased speaking and looked up, Senator Townsend leaped angrily to his feet. "What part has Russia in this?" he demanded.

"I called Chairman Chernychev immediately," the President answered. "An ultimatum has been delivered to Russia demanding the immediate return of all territories once sovereign to China. I have scant doubt but that similar notes have been handed to the governments of India, Pakistan, Burma, and other adjacent nations."

The President motioned for silence and continued, "Chairman Chernychev has been in direct communication with Peking."

"With Peng Yi?" shrieked Representative Chappell. He cupped his ear.

The President nodded. "Peng Yi has threatened to devastate Russia with a two hundred plane nuclear attack if Russia fails to comply with the terms of the ultimatum within the allotted time."

"We could wipe China from the map," exclaimed Senator Townsend. "So could Russia."

"At a frightful cost, Senator. Peng Yi informed the Chairman that he'd attack immediately at the first sign of hostilities."

"China's planes are obsolete," the Senator shouted heatedly. "Russia could blast them like clay pigeons."

"All of them? Suppose just ten or fifteen got through?"

"Mr. President?" The Attorney General was on his feet. "We can knock out Novaya Zemlya and that orbital bomb. We discussed it earlier and we agreed that we could."

"We have hopes, Carlton."

"China can't touch us!"

"Not if we act in time, no."

"Then we have nothing to fear, right?"

"It's much more complicated than that, Carlton."

"Are we trying to protect Russia?" Senator Townsend shouted.

"We're trying to protect civilization, Senator."

"Civilization," snorted the Senator. "What difference does it make if Russia and China destroy each other? I call it good riddance."

"I don't know that such a war could be contained, Senator. I believe not. Aside from that, we do have pacts with several of the Southeast Asian nations which would be involved." The President's voice was reprimanding. "Also, we don't know what fallout effects the world might suffer from a nuclear exchange. Dr. Thornhill?" He looked sharply at his science advisor.

"It would depend on the size, type, and number of bombs exploded," Thornhill replied cautiously.

"That's what I'm asking," the President snapped testily, "the size and type."

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Thornhill looked baffled. "We don't have that information, Mr. President."

"They developed the hydrogen bomb at Ching Hai Lake," Admiral Massey declared. "They test them regularly."

"Ching Hai Lake?"

"Northwest of Lanchow, on the Yellow River."

"I seem to have read a paper on that."

"Don't you know?" Senator Townsend shouted.

"About the bomb? Certainly," Thornhill declared indignantly. "But we don't know its exact size, power—how many they might have."

"You'd better believe they have a mess of them," Massey shot back grimly. "I have a hunch they might surprise us."

Thornhill sucked at his long underlip. "It could be quite a fallout," he observed finally.

"Let's get along with destroying that base and that damned orbital bomb," the Senator demanded. "They're hanging over our heads like the sword of . . . of Damocles."

Leaving the remaining members of the ExComm arguing loudly and heatedly, the President drew Defense Secretary McCloud, Admiral Massey and General Guyer into the seclusion of an adjoining room. Motioning them to sit down, he spoke long and earnestly, occasionally pausing to shoot quick questions at one or another of them.

Guyer felt his hopes flare as he followed the President's words. His admiration soared anew for this tall, gaunt man who faced them, seeking reason and logic to back his decisions. He seemed oblivious of the tremendous burden which, in the ultimate, was his alone. Admiral Massey's thin face was set in hard lines; his gray eyes were calm. McCloud nervously rubbed his hands.

The President confided that CIA Director Martin Sankler was working toward a possible solution—"an extremely thin thread on which to hang a hope," he cautioned—but even that depended on timing; failure of any part of the overall plan could plunge the world into a nuclear holocaust.

The President didn't explain Sankler's plan, but Guyer

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felt he could guess it; the clues from the past added up. It was audacious, risky, brilliant. He marveled at the many threads which must be brought together, and wondered if it could be done.

The President looked at him. "Jim, do you believe General Lampert's plan is feasible."

"Yes, sir, I have the fullest confidence."

"How about the plane?"

"If General Lampert says it'll fly, it'll fly."

"What do you think of his plan for . . . the final solution?"

"I hope it won't have to be put into effect, sir. I really do. And so does General Lampert."

The President sighed heavily and looked at the Admiral.

"We're as ready as we'll ever be," Massey offered.

The President stared introspectively toward the window for a long moment, then flicked back his gaze. "All right," he said tersely, "let's get with it."

TWELVE

Time: 5:10 A.M., 12 July 1973.

Place: Edwards Air Force Base on the Mojave Desert.

DAWN WAS EDGING over the rim of the world when Major Sam Kirby and General Joe Lampert entered the locker room to don their high-altitude pressure suits. Kirby had been both startled and pleased the previous afternoon, when Lampert had announced himself as copilot for the XMSV-2 flight. They'd been conducting taxi and lift-off trials of the big bird over the sun-baked floor of the sixty-five square-mile dry lake that served as center for Air Force flight test activities when Lampert made his decision known.

"I wouldn't ask another pilot to do it," he explained.

Kirby's first reaction that it was absolutely ludicrous for a two-star general to serve as bat boy for a major was swept away quickly in the realization that he was younger, his reactions swifter and more certain, as Lampert obliquely

had acknowledged. Against that, Lampert's first-hand experience in orbital flight and high-altitude supersonic testing was difficult to equal, not to mention the iron nerves that went with it; the General was built for emergencies. Kirby was grateful to have him along.

They chatted briefly while the ground crew helped them into their space suits. The suits differed radically from the usual high-altitude flight garments. The plastic helmet was larger, with a wide, air-tight face plate to allow maximum peripheral vision. It had a built-in communication system along with a special leaded-glass visor to screen out the retina-searing rays of the sun. The suit, gloves and boots, although bulky, could be pressurized almost instantly, or worn deflated for comfortable cockpit flight. Should cockpit pressure be lost, suit inflation was automatic. The suit also was equipped for space operations outside the plane. A strap-on back pack provided independent oxygen and power sources. Touch-buttons controlled the suit temperature. A space lamp, built into the visor, provided visibility in shaded or night areas.

Finishing dressing, they went into the hangar, pausing silently to survey the XMSV-2, which had been given the code name "High Girl." At first sight it appeared somewhat like a conventional jet fighter except that it was longer, bigger in the belly, and had the needle-nose that marked the rocket designs. At the moment, its wings, set far back on the fuselage, were fully extended—the position that provided the maximum lifting surface to get its vast weight airborne. As speed increased and less lift was required, they could be swept back to reduce drag. During supersonic flight the wings folded partially into the body, giving the plane the appearance of a long-nosed arrowhead. At hypersonic flight they were scarcely visible. Together with the triple propulsion system—turbojet-to-ramjet-to-rocket power—the variable swept wings gave the plane its Earth-to-orbit capability. Kirby thought High Girl beautiful.

General Lampert believed so, too. It showed in his eyes as he walked under the wing, gazing upward at the special rockets and instrumentation that had been installed, and at the full span slats and flaps that gave the wings addition-

al lift during takeoff and landing. He critically inspected the engine nacelles which housed the big power plants, sweeping his eyes back to the empennage before he said gruffly, "Let's go."

Kirby made a quick cockpit check before signaling a waiting tug to pull them from the hangar. The morning was still and cool but he already felt sweaty. The sky was an intense cobalt blue. The sun made sharp shadows that grotesquely distorted the plane's profile on the asphalt. As the tug tractored them onto a feeder strip, he thought of Jill.

Sam Kirby lived in a pleasant frame house in Lancaster, thirty miles southeast of the base. It had a small patch of green lawn shaded by two cottonwood trees and a backyard swimming pool where Rick, seven, and Don, nine, spent the greater part of their time when not in school. Jill used to worry over the pool, but now both boys swam like fish. It wasn't surprising that both boys wanted to be Air Force test pilots; that nagged at Jill's mind, too.

"Don't worry, they'll probably wind up in the nuclear subs," Kirby cheerfully told her. She didn't exactly find it funny.

Two days before, as Sam was leaving the house, he warned Jill that he might be away for a while. He didn't lie, but neither did he tell her what it was. But Jill knew. She'd been edgy ever since the nuclear warhead story had been splashed across the front page. Instinctively she'd coupled it with the loss of the XMSV-1. Kirby marveled at her prescience.

"The XMSV-2, Sam?" She'd looked wide-eyed at him, attempting to stifle her fear.

"Taxi tests, perhaps a short wring-out," he conceded. She didn't press him for more, but had clung fiercely to him before he kissed her goodbye. Then he'd gone around to the rear yard to see the boys before driving down the long, sage-lined road that led to the base. Now, waiting, he scrunched sideways to gaze up into the sky; Jill and the boys seemed far away.

When the ground checkoff had been completed and the crew withdrawn, Kirby closed his face plate and went on

oxygen. Lampert made a time check and set the clocks. Worked out on the computers, their flight profile had been programmed to the second to achieve rendezvous with the orbital missile which, hurtling down from the Arctic wastes along Longitude 120 West, would cross slightly to the west of the Mojave a handful of moments hence. Moving at more than 17,000 miles per hour, it set the speed that High Girl would have to match to achieve rendezvous. The XMSV-1 had proved the plane could do it. Beyond that were other problems, but they were mathematical—time, speed, direction; he wasn't worried.

He adjusted his helmet mike and called, "Kirby in High Girl. Do you read me?"

"Five by five, Major."

"Give our regards."

"Right-o, Major. Take care."

"Will do." Kirby cast a quick look around at the hangars shimmering in the sun and the jet fighters and high-altitude needle-nosed X-rockets that appeared like small bugs on the busy apron, then fired up the twin turbojets. The powerful engines made a whooshing roar in his helmet. Vibrations from the plane came through his suit. He cut in the air conditioner; the cockpit became cooler. He flicked a fast glance skyward. Thunderheads balanced atop the mountains to the west resembled a patch of mushrooms.

A voice in his earphones called, "Baker to High Girl. Radio check. How do you read me, Sam?" Tim Baker was flying one of the two chase planes assigned to cover the takeoff.

"Loud and clear, Tim."

"About ready for the leap?"

"Right on clock time," Kirby responded, then called to George Hacker in the second chase plane, "Ready, George?"

"Ready and rarin'," Hacker answered. Kirby squinted through the glass. The two chase planes were circling back for a position to hold him in their cameras during the first critical moments of flight; after that their supersonic jets would be left far below and behind. At the moment they were two black dots distant in the sky.

Lampert glanced sideways at him and made a circle with

his gloved thumb and forefinger. The gesture made Kirby feel better. He made a fast mental check of the things he'd done and had yet to do, then taxied along the feeder strip and turned onto the 15,000-foot main runway between painted guide lines that appeared to converge far ahead. They shimmered in the early morning light. The plane felt cumbersome and unwieldy. He locked his shoulder harness and rechecked his trim settings. Glancing at the clock, his mouth felt dry and cottony, a sensation he experienced at the start of every experimental flight. His hands were steady.

"Two minutes," Lampert said in the phones. His voice was flat and unemotional.

Kirby craned his neck to look at the sky and called, "High Girl to tower. Am I cleared for takeoff?"

"Roger, you are cleared for takeoff, High Girl. Good hunting."

Waiting gave Kirby a moment to think. The original intent of finding and destroying the orbital warhead now had become something vastly more. General Lampert had confided the latest turn of events, and what they might do to counter them. For the first time Kirby realized the full significance of the special gear that Lampert had ordered fabricated, and which now was stowed in the plane's cargo hatch. It also gave Kirby added insight into why Joe Lampert had climbed so swiftly through the military ranks; he was a man who looked far ahead. His plan was audacious, dependent on split-second timing. And luck, Kirby thought; they needed lots of luck.

"Thirty seconds," Lampert intoned.

As the clock hand reached time zero, Kirby pushed the throttle forward, seeing the needle-nose move sluggishly ahead between the painted guidelines. The jet scream rose to a harsh wail as the runway began receding faster and faster under the plane's nose. Off to one side the sage hills sped to his rear.

"High Girl to Chase; I'm rolling," he called. Easing back on the stick, he felt the plane become airborne and tucked the wheels into their wells; then the runway was gone and the stark desert wheeled past below them.

"Chase to High Girl; we have you," Baker called.

"Tag along," he answered.

"Looks smooth as silk, Sam. She took off like a wild goose. How does she handle?"

"Like a dream."

"Put my name high on the list, will you? I'm anxious to get at that baby."

"You'll have to speak to the General, Tim."

"What's the matter?" drawled Baker. "Can't he hear me?"

Kirby heard the General's soft chuckle in the phones. He stirred the controls and the plane started upward in a long, shallow curve, gathering speed with every passing second. Shifting forces pressed his body downward against the seat. Glancing at the clock and then at the instruments, he brought the plane into a southerly heading, then moved a switch which caused the wings to partially retract. They came back slowly, glinting in the sun, locking into a new position five seconds later.

Lampert chatted briefly with the chase planes and ground control, commenting on High Girl's performance. Reverting to his status as a test pilot, he ticked off the fine points caught by his eyes, ears and tactual organs. He spoke as if the plane were a woman; his voice was almost sensual. Kirby understood the feeling. High Girl wasn't a thing of stainless steel and titanium and exotic space materials, but was a creature with life: she had a heart that pumped fuel, engines that were her muscles, sensors that scanned her environment, reporting on the state of things "out there." Kirby felt very close to her.

Lampert intoned the Mach numbers as they slipped effortlessly through the sound barrier. "Mach one," and shortly afterward: "Mach one point three . . ."

Kirby glanced at the instruments. Fifty thousand feet. They were leaving the troposphere, the dense air region where storms are born, climbing into the thin, cold stratosphere where the temperature remains at almost a constant 55 degrees C. There, the atmosphere was so thin it could scarcely transmit sound; it was the home of high-velocity air currents and strange mother-of-pearl clouds.

He felt a sudden jubilation, sensing the power beneath his fingertips. The big turbojets had a whispery, feathery

sound in the thinning air. The wings had been swept farther back; now High Girl somewhat resembled the paper planes he used to fly in the classroom. Those had been good days, when the world had been filled with high adventure and he'd pedal out to Miramar to watch the fighter jets take off and land. The Air Force Academy, getting his wings, courting Jill. . . . The memories whispered at his mind. But the world was moving faster now.

He stirred at the thought. Newer, bigger ICBMs were on the pad, giant nuclear submarines roamed the seas, a new breed of bomber had come to life—now the orbital war-head! What kind of a world would they give to Rick and Don, to all the children of the new generation? Against that, men were circling the Earth in scientific satellites, other men were on the moon—the Mars ship was building. . . . Between thoughts, he listened to the chatter between Lampert, the chase planes and the ground. In what seemed no time at all, Baker called into the phones, "We're losing you, High Girl."

"Roger, Tim, you can go back to bed." Kirby squinted through the glass. His takeoff into the west and long, shallow turn onto a southerly course had carried him over the Pacific. Off to his left the Southern California and Baja coasts were receding into the east. The long blue finger of the Gulf of California outlined the mainland of Mexico. Closer in, San Clemente Island was wheeling to his rear.

He looked up. The sky had commenced to darken, taking on a velvet sheen. It held somewhat the appearance of an inverted bowl, its sides curving down and down until they merged with the blue of the sea. High Girl climbed at a shallow angle.

"Mach two point eight," Lampert called.

As the speed needle touch Mach three, Kirby warned, "Stand by for the ramjets." He moved the switch that cut off the turbojets and started the liquid hydrogen-fueled ramjets. There was a brief, intolerable silence before they exploded to life. Air rammed into the front inlets of the engines provided oxidizer for the liquid hydrogen and set up a barrier that forced the burning gases to escape from the rear, thus providing thrust. Movable vanes in the jet

stream enabled High Girl to be maneuvered. The engines were, Kirby knew, an advanced version of the pulsed jets that had sent the German buzz bombs screaming over London toward the close of World War II.

As the liquid hydrogen ramjets caught hold, High Girl shuddered and leaped ahead with an acceleration that flattened him against the seat. He tightened his stomach muscles to counter the increasing pressure. The General grunted in the phones. Kirby smiled to himself; it took some doing to get a grunt out of old Joe Lampert, he thought.

Kirby twisted his head, squinting back along the coast. Far to the north the men in ground control would be bent over their electronic consoles, following the readouts telemetered back from the plane. Radar scans held them in an invisible grip, plotting their position on glowing cathode tubes. Beyond that, a line of communications had been set up through satellite, ground and seaborne systems which enabled direct voice contact from almost any orbital position. They were alone—like gold fish in a bowl, he thought.

Lampert called, "Mach four," and after a brief pause: "Mach four point five."

"Beach Boy?" Kirby called the designation for the communication center at California's Vandenberg Air Force Base, to which monitoring and ground control had been transferred.

"Beach Boy to High Girl, we have you on the scope."

"How is our heading?"

"On the button, Sam."

"Johnnie?"

"Sure, didn't you recognize my voice? I'm one of the better-known communicators."

Kirby smiled. Johnny O'Day was one of the better-known communicators. "About that heading?" he prompted.

"I read you at . . ." There was a brief pause before O'Day followed with their altitude and speed, and matched their actual position with their programmed one. The two were nearly identical. Lampert checked the figures against their instruments and gave an okay.

"High Girl out," Kirby called.

"Mach six," Lampert intoned. Kirby's eyes automatically

swept the instrument panel, noting cabin pressure and temperature. The lights glowed softly and the silence was absolute save for the occasional cracklings in his phones.

At Mach nine, high above the troposphere, Kirby opened the air scoops, sensing a momentary bucking as the thin air was sucked in and compacted in the compressors that filled the plane's belly. The oxygen molecules were stripped away, liquefied and stored as an oxidizer for the liquid hydrogen-fueled rockets that would blast them into orbital space in the moments ahead. When that time came, High Girl no longer would be a plane; she would be a pure rocket, as much so as those launched from Cape Kennedy and Vandenberg. As such, she was a creature of two worlds: the atmosphere and space itself.

The sky darkened rapidly as the speed needle moved through Mach ten, eleven and twelve. Off in the west Kirby saw the ribbon of night. The ocean below was a strange blue-gray, here and there obscured by passing clouds.

He switched his eyes back to the clock, waited, then closed the air scoops, feeling the plane lunge ahead. Up and up, faster and faster; the speed needle crawled to Mach fifteen. Peering ahead, he failed to discern stars. Far off in the east the sun was an intolerably bright disc, rayless against the nigrescent sky.

A voice, surprisingly clear, called in the phones: "Beach Boy to High Girl. You're passing through two hundred thousand."

"That's a start," he answered jauntily.

"Wait'll you cut in those rockets, Sam."

"Can hardly wait," he drawled. "How's our heading?"

"On the button; a three-second position lag."

"We'll make it up when I touch off the candles," he cracked. "High Girl out." The whispering of the ramjets had died, leaving the absolute silence he always associated with space. Such a silence, he knew, never existed on Earth, save perhaps in the anechoic chambers constructed to study worlds without sound. It was a silence that made him realize just how noisy the world was—even the desert in the cool of the summer nights. There, at least, were the rustlings

of small creatures in the sage, the occasional howl of a coyote.

"About time for the rocket switchover," Lampert reminded.

Kirby jerked back his eyes to the clock, surprised by the quick flight of minutes. "Roger," he acknowledged.

"Ten seconds on the mark." Lampert watched the sweep of the second hand and called: "Mark!"

At time zero, Kirby shut down the ramjets, then flipped the safety cover off the rocket switch and toggled it to "ON." For several seconds High Girl coasted in ballistic flight while the fuel pumps brought the liquid hydrogen and liquid oxygen together in the burn chambers.

The fuel ignited. The reaction was instantaneous. High Girl shuddered and leaped ahead with a force that snapped back his head and pinned him to the seat. He forced his hand against the controls, angling the long needle nose higher into the sky. The resulting g forces drained the blood from his brain, pooled it in his lower body extremities despite the counter-pressure of the air bladders. His feet and calves felt like inflated balloons, his hands were leaden, his lips pulled tightly against his teeth. The flesh seemed to crawl from his eyes. He had the sensation of being ripped to shreds. The instrument panel danced a mad dance, appearing as a blur of lights that all ran together.

Momentarily dizzy and light-headed, he blinked rapidly to bring his eyes back into focus, at the same time holding his stomach muscles taut. He'd been through high g's before; he didn't like them but they were the ticket to space. The g forces brought on by the ramjets had been mild in comparison.

"Beach Boy to High Girl . . ." The voice in his phones was weak and eerily remote.

"High Girl, I read you." The words were wrung from his lips.

"You're on course, High Girl. You're *ding hao*."

"Thanks," Kirby gasped. He grinned crookedly despite his discomfort and tried to relax, but found he couldn't. Each attempted movement was rigid, painful. Momentarily he wondered how the General was doing; the g's were too high for a man of that age. That age? His lips twisted at the thought. Joe Lampert was as lean and hard and tough as

they came, and if he were shouldering close to half a century, it didn't show in his eyes or step or nerve. Old Joe Lampert probably would outlast them all, die in bed.

Kirby felt the shifting g forces as High Girl, now on automatic and following a programmed course, shot out into space. He shoved forward in the seat, peering through the leaded glass. Small puffball clouds dotted the Pacific. The water had changed color, becoming a deep, vivid blue. It seemed to go on and on. Only in the west did it end; there it merged with the dusk of night. Lifting his eyes, he caught the first glimmer of stars.

Lampert pushed forward in his seat and looked at the instrument console. "Cut-off in ten seconds, Sam."

"It'll feel good, sir."

"Knock off the formalities," Lampert snapped, then added, "for the duration." Kirby smiled. Everything was going to be all right. He knew it in his bones.

He was slender, in his middle thirties, of average height for a Chinese. His dark, neatly-pressed trousers and white shirt with the hand-knit tie and light linen jacket gave him the appearance of a prosperous young Hong Kong business man until one saw his face; it was lean, hard, with thin, tight lips and eyes in which the corneas appeared flat and blank. It was also an intelligent face.

His name, for the time being, was Lu Chang. It was a new name and not one that he particularly fancied, but it was on the passport he'd acquired; as such, he'd have to get used to it. He also carried identification as an agent of Wu Han's dread secret police.

He crossed the bay from Hong Kong Island to Kowloon and went directly to the railroad station to purchase a ticket for the border. An elderly Chinese clerk in the ticket office peered at him through the grillwork and said, "The border is closed."

"Not for me," he answered. He stared at the clerk until the ticket was forthcoming, then slipped it into his pocket and walked out to wait for the train. When it pulled out of the station half an hour later, he found himself almost the sole passenger.

Sitting by the window, he watched the rice paddies and low hills sweep past. His mind wasn't on the scenery; it dwelt instead on the terrible secret he shared—the responsibility so suddenly thrust on him. In truth, he reflected, he held the future of the world in his palm. And should he fail? He contemplated the possibility philosophically, for when all was said and done, men were but messengers of the gods. He'd never quite lost that belief.

Fifty minutes after leaving the Kowloon station the train chugged to a halt at the border. He peered curiously through the window toward Shumchun, on the Chinese side. The narrow iron bridge that linked China with the New Territories was heavily guarded by khaki-clad soldiers. He wasn't surprised.

Descending from the train, he found himself virtually alone in the station. The students, families on visits, small businessmen and peddlers with their unwieldy bundles were gone. The silence was oppressive. He sighed and started toward a small office next to the gate that led to the bridge.

The usual procedure for crossing the border was to have the passport sent across to Shumchun. When the visa was stamped and the passport returned, its owner was allowed to proceed into China. The process was time-consuming and he had no time. He circumvented the formalities by the use of a fictitious story to the officials on this side, backed by the display of his passport. They shrugged and let him through the gate; if he could get through to the other side, so much the better.

Crossing the bridge, his heels echoed hollowly on the cross-planking. Ahead, the Shumchun station was plastered with banners and slogans of the Red Guard. He saw a large number of Red Army trucks and a line of wheeled howitzers that appeared of World War II vintage.

Two soldiers at the far side straightened, holding their rifles ready. It was, he thought, the longest walk of his life. As the gap narrowed to a few paces, one of the soldiers stepped forward and lifted his rifle menacingly. "Halt," he ordered, "the bridge is closed."

He extended his agent's credentials. "Summon your commanding officer," he ordered peremptorily. The soldier

glanced at the paper, his face worried and perplexed. "Hurry," he rasped.

"Wait," the soldier answered uneasily. He spoke rapidly to his companion, who hurried away, returning several minutes later accompanied by an officer. The latter eyed the agent suspiciously.

"Your name?" he barked.

"Lu Chang, comrade Colonel." The agent purposefully promoted him by several ranks.

"Your papers?"

He extended the passport along with the secret police identification. The officer scarcely glanced at the former, his attention riveted on the latter. He looked up, his eyes filled with respect, uncertainty and—the agent thought—a tinge of fear.

"Take me to your commanding officer," he snapped.

The officer's uncertainty vanished, replaced by relief at the prospect of passing the responsibility to a higher authority. "Follow me, comrade," he directed.

Entering the Shumchun station, the agent saw that it was being used as a barracks. Groups of soldiers lounged around, smoking and talking amid piles of bed rolls and personal belongings. Many were asleep. Members of the Red Guard were plastering the inside walls with anti-American and anti-Russian slogans which, he knew, reflected the official party line at any given time; often they were changed overnight.

The commanding officer proved to be an actual colonel. Sitting behind a desk in what formerly was the station master's office, he curtly dismissed the agent's escort, then carefully scrutinized the passport and secret police identification. Watching him, the agent knew he wasn't one to stampede easily; he didn't have that look.

Finally the colonel glanced up. His eyes were disconcertingly sharp. "Do you work directly for comrade Wu?" he asked.

"Most directly."

"Where is comrade Wu now?"

He recognized the trap and answered, "On Hong Kong Island, comrade Colonel. Certainly you are aware of that."

H-BOMB OVER AMERICA

"And you come from him?"

"By his personal orders," he assented.

The colonel asked stiffly, "What is it you wish?"

"I must get to General Li Chi immediately."

"That is impossible."

"I travel on a matter of grave importance to the security of the state," he said evenly. "I have been instructed to deliver certain information to the General immediately."

"What information?"

"That is for the comrade General's ears only," he answered smoothly.

The colonel looked miffed. "Comrade Wu does not command the army," he said pointedly.

"Should I encounter difficulty, I have been instructed to report the matter directly to the comrade Chairman."

"Comrade Peng?" the colonel interrupted disbelievingly.

"Those are my orders."

"Comrade Wu's orders?"

"By personal direction," he affirmed.

"They are highly unusual."

"Most unusual, comrade Colonel, but you will agree, these are unusual times." He saw the baffled look creep over the officer's face. It was no small thing he had asked, and of a mere colonel. But as commanding officer, the colonel was stuck, and he knew it. The constant suspicion between the army and the secret police made the knowledge all the more galling.

The colonel looked away, then brought back his eyes. "Perhaps I can arrange communications," he suggested tentatively.

"I must see the comrade General personally," he insisted.

"The comrade General is far away."

"Then arrange air transportation," he demanded boldly. "My mission can't wait." Their eyes clashed briefly before the colonel lowered his gaze to the papers, a look of resignation on his face.

"I will see what can be done," he said finally.

Time: 1420 hours (GMT), 12 July 1973.

Place: In polar orbit.

"GOT HER!" General Lampert exclaimed. He fiddled with a dial and the blip that had appeared on the radarscope grew brighter. "I read her at twenty-two thousand yards."

"That's shooting." Kirby felt pleased with himself. Scarcely a moment before the XMSV-2, in its ballistic stage resembling a finned dart, had coasted into orbit at almost the precise time and position targeted. Although much of the flight had been programmed, pilot skill still entered into it. Twenty-two thousand yards was no great miss, considering the satellite's speed.

"She's slightly below us." Lampert read off the figures.

"Tapes on?"

"Tapes on," he affirmed. Every word spoken during the mission would be taped, passed through a scrambler and automatically transmitted during passage over ground or seaborne stations, or when queried by a within-range communication satellite. The method provided a backup for direct broadcasts as well as a continuous record should some mishap occur.

"High Girl to Beach Boy," Kirby called.

"Beach Boy . . ." The voice was faint and spectral.

"How do you read me, Johnnie?"

"Faint but clear, Sam. How me?"

"Sing-song, Johnnie. We have Bertha on the scope." Bertha was the satellite's code name.

"Beach Boy . . . affirmative." Johnnie O'Day's voice became twisted and lost in a burst of static. Kirby checked the cabin pressure, opened his face plate, shut off the suit oxygen system and began unbuckling his harnessing. His first movements in the weightlessness of space were awkward and fumbling before he gained control of them. Freed from the restraints, he sat quietly to give himself time to adjust to the strange, floating sensation.

"Ready for rendezvous?" asked Lampert. His voice was briskly businesslike. He'd already freed himself from his harnessing and had checked his instruments, now was ready for the next step. Kirby marveled at his quick adaptation.

Glancing at the radarscope, he quickly summed their situation. They were somewhat higher than the satellite, trailing it by more than twelve miles. Any increase in speed would increase their radius, hence they would overshoot it. He had to apply retrothrust, drop a calculated distance, then apply just the right amount of forward thrust to increase their speed and radial distance from the Earth and bring them into an orbital plane close to the target. But not too close! The final approach could be ticklish. Rendezvous was a simple matter with the computer but he liked to picture each move in his mind. Although the attitude control system had been placed on automatic, he made a quick visual check of the horizon indicator before signifying his readiness.

Lampert flexed his gloved fingers, set the interim timer on zero, and punched a set of keys on the computer. Watching the readout, Kirby flipped open a plastic safety dome and switched one of the firing keys, at the same instant starting the timer. Small, forward-pointing retrorockets flamed briefly and he felt a light g force as the XMSV-2, its forward velocity slowed, began to drop from orbit.

"Commencing transfer," he called into the phones.

"Affirmative, High Girl. Keep your tapes on." The voice held the spectral quality he associated with transmission through the satellite relay system.

Kirby peered out into the vastness around him. Far in the west the curtain of night hugged the Pacific, giving the illusion that part of the Earth had been blotted from existence; that portion appeared as a black splotch against the firmament. The stars at its edge resembled fireflies.

He switched his gaze. Ahead, the ocean formed a gigantic curved plane, broken on one side by gigantic cloud formations. Far off, in the east, the coast of Mexico crawled away and became lost in the distance. Closer in, the water was unbelievably blue, here and there streaked with an emerald color or slashed by vagrant clouds.

He glanced at the chronometer. Hurling southward, they crossed four degrees of latitude per minute. In ninety minutes they would complete one orbit. During that time the Earth would rotate eastward twenty-two and one-half degrees, hence in sixteen hours they again would be above their starting point. Now, in short time, they'd hurtle above the Antarctic ice fields across the bottom of the world. Fantastic, he thought.

"Two minutes to go," Lampert observed.

"Roger." Kirby checked the plane's attitude and switched his eyes to the timer. At zero second he punched another firing key and the powerful liquid hydrogen rockets flamed, pinning him against the back of the seat. High Girl leaped forward, simultaneously beginning her outward spiral to intercept the satellite. Watching the clock, he cut off the engines; in utter silence they coasted through the emptiness of space.

"She's on the scope," Lampert said. "We need a touch of thrust." His fingers went to the computer.

Kirby eyed the readout and fired a secondary thruster, feeling the slight sensation of weight before it cut off. "About right?"

Lampert switched his eyes to the visual scope. "About right," he agreed.

"Range?"

"Slightly over two thousand yards and still somewhat above us." He read off the exact figures and added, "Our closure rate's slightly more than eleven feet per second—a bit fast."

"Too fast," Kirby agreed. He made minor corrections in yaw and pitch, using the small hydrogen peroxide thrusters, then pointed the nose thrusters forward and fired a brief burst. The retrothrust slowed their closure rate to below eight feet per second. He tried again, settling for a final closure rate of five feet per second. Ten minutes would take them to around one thousand yards from the satellite, a distance he considered close enough for a start.

Scrunching forward, he scanned the sky. Above them, far ahead, he saw the satellite. The sun glinted on its metal skin. Periodically the light blinked out, changed position

and came on again, giving an odd stroboscopic effect. "She's in slow end-over-end tumble," he called.

Lampert read the information onto the tape and asked, "What's her rate?"

Kirby zeroed a timer, glued his eyes to the visual scope and watched the satellite's nose come around and sweep upward. When it peaked, he started the clock. The satellite's movement reminded him of a broad-bladed pinwheel turning against the stars. When the nose peaked again he stopped the clock. "About fifteen seconds . . . four rpm," he answered.

He dropped his gaze. The gleam of ice fields, like far-away panes of glass in the sunlight, was rushing toward them. Within minutes they'd cross the bottom of the world to hurtle up over the Indian Ocean. Due to the Earth's eastward rotation, they would cross Somaliland, the tip of Ethiopia, Arabia and Iraq, then cut the Russian border east of the Caspian Sea. Stalingrad would wheel beneath them, Moscoow would flee past in the west. They'd emerge over the Barents Sea west of Novaya Zemlya, the ICBM base from which the satellite had been launched.

More to the point, they'd cross Russia through forty degrees of latitude—ten minutes orbital time. Russian radar nets would pin them in the sky. The Novaya Zemlya scan certainly would catch them. He said so.

"That point worries me," the General agreed. "They might panic down there, not wait for orders from Peking."

"Panic?"

"Hit the ICBM buttons, Sam."

"I thought we were due to clobber it before they had a chance."

"They want to make certain the satellite's out of commission first."

"Why? That doesn't make sense."

"Doesn't it?" asked Lampert. "The base commander probably has a radio hot line open to Peking."

"He wouldn't get a chance to use it," Kirby declared.

"Probably not, but what would Peking think if the line suddenly went dead? They'd push the button on this baby but fast."

"You've got me sweating," Kirby said.

"Everybody's sweating. This is a sweaty game."

"Why don't we knock that baby down?" he asked harshly.

"We could nail her from here with our rockets."

"We have plans, Sam." The General's voice closed the subject. Kirby felt a quick flash of resentment, yet realized that Lampert probably had been instructed to tell him no more than was necessary. The political stakes were too big. As such, the information would be spooned to him only as he needed it.

He stared through the leaded glass as the satellite grew in his visual field. Cylindrically-shaped, it emerged from the night, its sides alternately sunlight and shadowed as it tumbled lazily through space. He glimpsed occasional circular flashes that puzzled him until he realized they were caused by sunlight on the saucers Jed Walker had reported. *Ominous, threatening, deadly*—the words rang in his mind.

"Nearing one thousand yards," Lampert called.

"Roger, let's check that baby." He felt a sudden urgency.

"Anxious, Sam?"

"Damned anxious," he admitted. Glancing at the radar-scope, he trimmed his attitude and fired the small forward thrusters, relieved that the time for action had arrived. As Lampert intoned the slant range, he fired several short corrective bursts, slowing High Girl until the satellite rode at a constant distance from them.

Lampert pressed a button that ignited a small detonator in one of the special tubes fitted against the fuselage under High Girl's nose; the resulting explosion blew off the tube's cap. "Jerry-rigged but works," he said laconically. "Ready?"

Kirby rechecked the plane's trim and rogered.

A second button propelled a small object from the tube. It came out slowly, moving toward the satellite with a speed of around ten feet per second. The object was a packaged balloon fabricated from a paper-thin metal foil. A small pressurized helium bottle inside the package automatically released its gas and the balloon began to blossom into shape.

"Test sphere moving out." Lampert tested the tape in a playback, then gave the time and a running account of the balloon's progress. Slowly it inflated to its full ten-foot dia-

meter. The sunglint on the metal foil gave it the appearance of a huge half moon.

Kirby moved High Girl's nose in yaw and fired a short burst from the thrusters aft. The plane moved at a right angle to the satellite. Applying retrothrust, he brought it into a station in which the satellite, the balloon and the XMSV-2 occupied positions at the vertices of an acute triangle.

He peered at the satellite through the visual scope. Hank Vollmer's estimate of its size had been about right: it was huge. Its saucers and antennas stood out clearly as they swung under the sun. So did the two nose tubes Jed Walker had reported shortly before his death. As yet, it continued its slow tumbling mode, taking no cognizance of the intruder. Lampert reported the balloon at seven hundred yards from the satellite, and then at six hundred yards.

Kirby focused his attention on the rotating mass ahead of him, conscious of an inner tension. *Who was the hunter and who was the hunted?* There was something eerie about the cat and mouse game being played in the sky. He grimaced sourly. Abruptly he sensed change in the rhythmic pattern of sunlight and shadow. "She's changing movement," he snapped.

"Bertha changing movement." Lampert taped the report, then tried to reach Beach Boy direct. He got only a howl of static in the phones and returned his attention to the recorder.

Kirby said tensely, "Her tumbling rate is decreasing."

"Tumbling rate decreasing," Lampert echoed. He glanced at the tracker readout. "Balloon now five six oh yards from Bertha."

Kirby timed another complete revolution and called, "She's down to three rpm and slowing fast."

"Bertha at three rpm and slowing," Lampert reported.

Keeping his eyes riveted to the satellite, Kirby saw it cease its end-over-end tumble and come into position with its long axis horizontal to the Earth's surface. He passed the information to Lampert.

The General recorded it and snapped, "Describe it in detail, Sam."

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"She has an odd wallowing movement, sort of a pitch-yaw, as if different thrusters were firing," he explained. He tried to discern the sources of the thruster power and failed. The distance was too great—too much light and shadow. The scene held an odd illusory effect in which reality and unreality merged. "She's evidently equipped with a three-axis attitude control system," he finished.

Lampert taped the observation and added, "Bertha ended tumble in approximately forty seconds from the reported onset. Balloon now four two five yards from her."

Kirby said, "She's settling down to a more even keel with her long axis roughly at a right angle to us." The satellite gave him the impression of a huge whale afloat on a midnight sea. Ponderous and immense, it blotted out the stars. He wondered if the General saw anything of beauty in it.

Then he detected a change in movement and peered closer. "Her nose is coming around," Kirby exclaimed. "She's bringing her tubes to bear."

Lampert snapped the information into the recorder and followed with the time and range.

"Still coming . . ." Kirby broke off speaking, sensing a sudden inner stillness as the big steel nose swung toward alignment with the plane. He had the wild thought that Bertha wasn't responding to the balloon but was homing in on High Girl. He was reaching for the firing controls when the nose swept past, seemingly with decreasing speed. Exhaling slowly, he saw it sweep through the balloon's flight path. "She overshot," he said tightly.

"Bertha overshot the balloon." Lampert sounded like a broker quoting stock prices.

"She's stopping yaw." Kirby's nerves tingled again. "She's beginning to swing back."

"Bertha correcting," Lampert said. "There's little doubt but that it's an attack pattern."

"She's moving into alignment." The satellite's slow swing in yaw came to another halt and the movement again was reversed. The operation was repeated several times as the nose moved through smaller and smaller arcs. "She's homing in," Kirby reported tersely.

"Bertha homing in . . ."

Something erupted from one of the tubes and he glimpsed what appeared to be a white thread unraveling at tremendous speed toward the balloon. "Rocket!" he yelled.

"Bertha has fired one," the general reported.

"Right through the balloon," he exclaimed. The metal foil on one side crumpled, giving the balloon an oddly misshapen appearance.

The General scrutinized the balloon through the leaded glass. "She passed through without detonating," he observed.

Kirby grinned mirthlessly. "She would have detonated if she had hit something a little more solid, say like an orbital astroplane."

"But she didn't, that's the whole point of it." Lampert taped his report and added, "She probably only carried two rockets—one for each tube."

Watching the satellite, Kirby said, "Her nose is beginning to drift. Her attitude control system probably was designed to cut off at rocket launch to conserve fuel."

"Sounds reasonable, Sam." Lampert taped the surmise and returned his eyes to the pilot. "That should resolve any doubts about that baby."

Kirby grinned again. "I never had any, General."

"Nor I." The General sipped some water through the tube of a plastic squeeze bottle. Kirby craned his neck and gazed Earthward. They'd commenced their flight into the southeast of the dawn line, now were hurtling northward east of the dusk line. Far off in the west, lying in daylight, he glimpsed the upper reaches of the Red Sea. Saudi Arabia lay below them. Off to the right, blanketed in night, lay the Persian Gulf. It seemed impossible that so much had happened in so few moments.

Russia was coming up fast.

"Let's get with it," Lampert said abruptly. He blew the cover from the neutron gun that had been installed next to the balloon ejector. Inasmuch as there hadn't been time to provide controls for aiming the gun, it became necessary to aim the plane itself.

Kirby approached to within five hundred yards of the satellite, the maximum distance at which the neutron gun

was operable, then eyeballed High Girl's needle-nose into line with the warhead.

Lampert pressed a button and an invisible neutron beam shot out; instantly the needle on the scintillation counter jumped. "Hotter than a firecracker," he exclaimed.

"Let's yank its teeth," he answered woodenly.

"Start moving in," Lampert ordered.

Kirby cocked his head. "I don't suppose those tubes could be double-loaded?"

"We haven't time to find out," the General decided. "You'd better approach at a crabbed angle. If she shows any sign of response, hit the hot fire fast."

"I won't wait for orders."

"Don't, Sam."

Kirby accelerated the XMSV-2 toward the warhead, then brought the nose slightly around in yaw. If he had to hit the liquid hydrogen engines, they had a clear field. The warhead's motion had become a slow pinwheel, with the longitudinal axis lying about twenty degrees from the horizontal. The result was that the missile tubes never came into direct alignment with the plane. That was fine with him.

As they drew to within a hundred yards of the warhead, he maneuvered High Girl's nose back into alignment with their flight path and fired a short burst from the forward-pointing thrusters. It required several delicate corrective bursts before they rode at a constant distance of about fifty yards from the satellite. It appeared monstrous in the night.

Kirby glanced at the clock. Eight minutes had elapsed since the destruction of the balloon. In that time they'd covered thirty-two degrees of latitude. He gazed toward the dusk-covered Earth. Stalingrad already would have passed underfoot; Moscow, still in daylight, would sweep by in the west. Novaya Zemlya was coming up fast. He felt a sudden urgency.

As if reading his mind, Lampert said grimly, "My thoughts exactly."

"I'm ready," he answered briefly. Twisting in his seat, he reached back and lugged out the special back pack he would wear in space. He briefly inspected the oxygen and

electrical connections before Lampert helped him struggle into it. On Earth it weighed more than two hundred and fifty pounds; in orbit its weight was zero. But it was bulky and required several minutes to fit into place and buckle.

Finished, he fished the special tools he'd need from a stowage bin. He regarded them briefly, then discarded the long dacron tether he was supposed to wear outside the plane.

"You'd be safer with it," Lampert observed.

"If I overshoot, you can pick me up."

"Don't overshoot," Lampert countered woodenly. "I won't have time." Kirby knew he meant it. He slipped several short lengths of tether into a side pocket and hooked a pair of grip cutters, a heavy hammer and two space guns to his belt.

"Feel like Santa Claus," he grunted. They plugged their suits into the plane's oxygen system and closed their face plates. As the suits inflated, Kirby reduced cabin pressure from five to two pounds per square inch. When they'd tested their suits, he unplugged his from the plane and went on the back pack oxygen system. After that he vented the rest of the air from the cabin, unlocked the canopy and turned a switch that caused it to slide back. The stars seemed suddenly to explode with a dazzling brilliance; then he pushed himself out into space.

The first sensations were those of floating and disembodiment but he felt absolutely no disorientation. As before, he quickly adjusted, and almost as quickly decided that the sensation was extremely pleasant. "Testing," he called into his helmet mike.

"You're coming through fine, Sam. How me?"

"Loud and clear," he acknowledged. He fitted one of the space guns into his gloved hand and turned his body with swimming movements while he sighted in on the warhead. The sunglint on the metal skin was far brighter than when viewed from the interior of the cockpit and the shadows were a deep ebony, impenetrable to the eye. Swinging against the stars, it looked weird, unreal, deadly. Shifting his head, he glimpsed the Earth—day on one side, night on the other.

H-BOMB OVER AMERICA

The sunlit portion was a kaleidoscope of colors and patterns, a jumbled geometry pocked here and there by massive cloud islands.

"We're coming up over the Barents Sea," Lampert barked abruptly. "Novaya Zemlya will have us on the scope."

"Roger." Kirby stifled his sense of urgency and kicked his body around until his back was to the warhead. Raising his space gun, he attempted to align it so that the retro-thrust would act against his body's center of gravity, thus preventing him from going into a tumble. Holding his arm stiff, he fired a long burst and felt himself propelled backward. He had absolutely no sensation of movement. The stars swept past his face plate, then the Earth, and he realized he was in a slow head over heels spin. He fired a short burst in the direction of tumble to counter the movement. The stars stopped their mad sweep.

"Watch out for the nose," Lampert warned.

"Roger." He struggled into a position in which he could gauge the warhead's movement. It seemed incredibly slow, yet he knew the ponderous sweep of the nose or tail could crush his helmet like an egg shell. The thought wasn't pleasant.

He moved toward the center of the satellite and drifted alongside it for several seconds to get his bearings. An antenna rigging caught his eye and he propelled himself toward it, grasping it with his glove. Swinging his body around, he looked back toward the XMSV-2. It looked small and far away, a long, thin needle pasted against the sky. "Aboard," he said finally.

"Wreck those antennas," Lampert rasped.

"Roger." Hooking the space gun to his belt, he used the heavy cutters to destroy the antenna. He propelled himself toward the second one more confidently and repeated the process. Finished, he viewed his work with satisfaction. "When I retire I ought to get a job with the AT&T communication satellites," he quipped.

"If you don't hurry there won't be any AT&T," Lampert barked. "There's some rigging on the shadowed side."

"Fore or aft?"

"Amidship."

"On my way." Kirby looked at the curving hull beneath him and propelled himself gently, using the space gun to move around to the dark side. Passing into the shadow gave him the impression of plunging into a coal pit; it was that black. His line of sight with the plane cut, he lost radio contact. His fingers began to tingle and stiffen and he realized that the temperature controls hadn't been able to cope with the sudden transition from sunlight into the absolute cold of the shadowed side. Turning the temperature control to full, he sensed some relief.

He switched on the helmet light and a powerful beam shot out. Because the lamp was fixed to the helmet, which in turn was attached to the suit, he could direct the beam only by turning his entire body. Guiding it was cumbersome and awkward. It required several minutes to locate and destroy the rigging. Next he swept the beam methodically over the shadowed areas. Satisfied that no more antennas remained, he worked his way back around the curvature of the hull, flipping down his leaded glass visor as the brilliant sun disc came into view. His radio crackled to life.

"Sam?"

"The rigging's wrecked, General."

"Destroy the saucers," Lampert instructed.

"Yes, sir." Kirby propelled himself toward the nearest parabolic dish, grasping its metal shaft near the hull. Looping a short length of tether behind his knee, he tied it around the shaft, then unhooked the heavy hammer. Although it was weightless, he found it difficult to swing; the inertia was the same. He brought it down savagely against the dish. The reaction force propelled his body backward. He would have hurtled off into space were it not for the restraining tether. Finding his space gun empty, he replaced it with the spare one, conscious he was a long way from the plane. Panting and perspiring heavily, he located and destroyed the last two saucers.

Finished, he looked down. The Earth unexpectedly was clear of clouds. Due to the season and the globe's axial tilt, the sun overshot the North Pole so that the top of the world lay in daylight. Ice and snow blanketed land and sea alike so that no identifying characteristics were visible.

He exhaled slowly, vastly relieved; the great land mass of Russia had fled to their rear.

"We've passed Novaya Zemlya," he said wonderingly.

"Hurry back," the General snapped abruptly. "We have work to do."

"Work?"

"You didn't think you were finished, did you?" A soft chuckle came through the phones.

The polynya lay amid a wasteland of rafted polar ice composed of bergs, brash and needle-like spires that thrust high into the freezing Arctic air. The water of the polynya was a deep blue. From its surface rose a whip antenna, scarcely perceptible in the clutter around it. Awash just above the surface, the lens of the periscope swung slowly around.

Some miles away, perhaps fifteen or twenty, two planes flew low over the ice. From time to time the lead plane methodically bombed holes through the white mantle; the second plane dropped small sonar units into the exposed water.

Off in still another direction, some fourteen or fifteen miles from the polynya, a Russian icebreaker ground slowly through the loose white pack, trailing listening gear and dropping torpedo mines in her wake. Clocks in the mines kept them inactive until after the acoustical energy released into the water by the icebreaker died away; after that, the noise from any passing ship would bring them to life again. Small engines would start, rudder vanes would align themselves with the new acoustical energy stream; the mines would home in on the source of the sound.

At exactly 1540 hours on the Greenwich clock, a message from space was beamed down toward the slender antenna in the polynya. Lloyd Parman, on watch in the radio shack when it came, saw that it was in the "gold code," for which only the Captain had the key. His hands trembled; he knew what the gold code meant.

The executive officer Burton Winn and Lieutenant Commander George Wolfe, the engineering officer, were waiting in the wardroom when Captain Morley entered. Their faces

were still and set. As they started to rise, he motioned them to remain seated. Locking the door behind him, he sat across from them at the table, on the top of which were a pencil and a plain white pad.

"It's go," Morley said simply. The engineering officer exhaled slowly. Winn's face betrayed no emotion. Morley drew the decoded message from his pocket and laid it on the table, then copied a numerical sequence that appeared in the message on the pad. He wrote the numbers in clear, bold strokes; he sat back.

The executive officer drew an envelope from his pocket. Moments before he had gotten it from a private safe installed in his quarters. Periodically, when the ship was in port, an officer with the rank of captain came aboard, opened the safe and changed the envelope. He performed the same operation in the quarters belonging to the Captain and the Chief Engineer. None of them knew his name.

While the others watched, Winn broke the seal on the envelope, withdrew a paper and laid it alongside the pad. A four-number sequence matched a like sequence from the coded message.

The engineering officer repeated the process. Four more numerals were matched. Finally the Captain displayed the coded numbers contained in a second envelope in his possession; together, the twelve numbers exactly matched those on the pad.

The entire operation had taken less than two minutes. Next, each man drew a key from his jacket; it required all three keys to unlock certain mechanisms that guarded the missiles.

"Let's go," Morley said.

Several minutes later—at 1559 hours on the Greenwich clock—the water of the polynya rolled and a sleek gray missile emerged; it seemed to hang motionless in the air for a long moment before it pitched over on its programmed course, its engine flaming. Two minutes later, a second missile followed.

Morley briefly watched its swift climb in the scope, then swung toward the executive officer. "Let's get the hell out of here," he said.

FOURTEEN

Time: 1610 hours (GMT), 12 July 1973.

Place: In polar orbit.

KIRBY PROPELLED HIMSELF back toward the warhead, pulling a canister behind him at the end of a tether. He'd never been told the purpose of the canister before. In fact, he thought, he'd been told damned little. Until now. Now he knew. The knowledge filled him with excitement and awe. The General hadn't been out to balk the Chinese; he was striking for their wholesale defeat.

For the first time Kirby realized that he had but a small part in a dangerous and complicated plan. Small but vital. Men were working under the Arctic ice, in Hong Kong, Moscow, Washington—fighting to save the world, stave off the bomb. The President was attempting a desperate political gambit which, if successful, could end the whole affair. But Lampert held small hope that it would be. Kirby felt humble in the contemplation of what he knew.

"Watch that tumble!" Lampert's voice crackled in his ears.

"Roger . . ." Squinting through the leaded sun visor, he watched the warhead wheel slowly against the stars. It struck him as both graceful and awesome. Heading for a midship position, he propelled himself slowly alongside the metal skin until he reached the nose. For a moment he drifted, gazing at the immensity around him. The infinity of the firmament and the Earth far below gave him a lonely feeling.

He drew the canister to him and examined it. The bottom, flaring out into a deep well-like structure, was equipped with bored flanges set ninety degrees apart around the periphery. Slowly, awkwardly, he fitted the flaring bottom over the warhead's nose and moved it back until the bell-shaped rim was snug against the metal. Fumbling for the pen, he marked the positions of the flange holes, then freed the canister to drift at the end of the tether.

Unhooking the metal drill, he placed it in position for

the first hole and started the motor by pressing a button. The drill bit through the metal and sank from sight, revealing the space beneath it to be hollow. He was thankful for that.

When the four holes were drilled, he drew the canister back into position and inserted wing-type expanding bolts through the flanges, screwing the structure tightly against the hull. Next he located a small knob on the side of the canister and pulled out an extensible rod, the top of which unfolded to form a small antenna.

Finished, he pulled himself back to survey his work. It wasn't a factory job but the alignment was straight and the canister was fixed solidly to the nose. It would do.

Kirby sighed. The warhead once again was a weapon—ready for the go signal. Only now it would respond to a new master. Upon coded command from Beach Boy—if the command ever came—the powder inside the canister would ignite and create sufficient retrothrust to slow the warhead's speed, start it dropping from orbit. It would happen! Unless the President's political gambit failed. He looked down at the world and sighed.

"She's all connected," he said in the phones.

"Let's get along with her attitude control," Lampert answered. Kirby had wondered how that would be achieved, for the warhead's control system now was so much junk. Lampert showed him the way. As he explained it, Kirby laughed. Of course, the idea was simplicity itself.

Fastening a long tether to the tail of the rocket, he tied the other end through a small ring installed on High Girl's nose. With the two vehicles riding in close proximity, the tether floated limply in space. To correct the warhead's attitude, they would have to put the plane in brief retrofire. That would pull the warhead's tail around so that its nose pointed into its flight path. Problems remained, of course. High Girl would have to go into retrofire at the same instant the warhead's canister flamed to keep from ramming the satellite; and the tether would have to be cut before the warhead started down. But those things were minor.

He sighed again and clambered back into the plane.

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Shutting the canopy, he pressurized the cabin, deflated his suit, opened his helmet and squirmed out of the cumbersome back pack.

"Now we can hope," he said grimly.

"We wait," the General answered.

Wait! Wait while the Earth rotated eastward sufficiently far to bring Peking under the warhead's orbital path.

Wait for the coded command that would start the warhead down.

Wait for the death of twenty or thirty or forty million Chinese.

Wait!

Kirby fervently prayed that the command would never come.

He prayed the President's political gambit worked.

On July 14, a small story was sent out over the wires reporting the destruction of a Russian base on the Arctic island of Novaya Zemlya by an accidental atomic explosion. Later news sources reported a light fallout over Sweden and Norway. In the United States, the strontium index rose slightly. Public Health officials disclaimed any danger.

Following editions reported the shooting down of two Chinese military aircraft off Formosa by air units of the Navy's Seventh Fleet. The Department of Defense refused to comment. Foreign dispatches claimed that Russian MIG fighters had downed six Chinese planes which had overflown the Russian border. The reports were not confirmed. The mysterious satellite that had caused the brief war scare was destroyed during an unprogrammed reentry. It scarcely made page one.

The big news came from China.

In a surprise move, the Chinese Government announced briefly that Peng Yi had been relieved of his duties as Chairman of the Communist Party. The aged Premier Tan Fu-chun, earlier reported to have been kicked downstairs, was named as his successor. Significantly, both announcements were made from the headquarters of General Li Chi, reportedly China's new strong man.

H-BOMB OVER AMERICA

As before, the details were blurred.

The President was discussing it with a small inner group that consisted of State and Defense, the Attorney General, and Undersecretary Lloyd Milton. Senator Townsend, the majority leader, had been invited as an afterthought.

"It was close," the President confided. "Peng Yi had actually given the go signal when General Li Chi learned that Novaya Zemlya had been destroyed and that the warhead was programmed to burst over Peking. When he found that out and got our terms, he moved fast."

The Attorney General asked, "Didn't Peng Yi know?"

"Not at the time."

"Then how did the General get the word?" Senator Townsend asked.

"We told him," the President replied.

"We?" the Senator exclaimed incredulously. "How did we get through to him? I didn't know we had that kind of communications."

"We don't, Senator. We sent in a man. The CIA man in Hong Kong pulled off that one."

"The one called Hammit?" The Senator cocked his head. "I thought he was all shot up?"

"He's recovering, fortunately."

"But how did he arrange it? Do we have Chinese agents?"

"I don't know the exact details yet." A puzzled frown crept over the President's face. "I understand they used the credentials of a Chinese secret agent who was killed in Hong Kong—used them to send a cop."

"A cop?"

"A Lieutenant Chun of the Hong Kong police." The President nodded. "However Hammit did it, he certainly pulled a chestnut from the fire."

Early in September, two men met in the European Headquarters of the United Nations in Geneva, Switzerland. They stood with their aides while swarms of photographers and television cameramen recorded the event for the world.

When the formalities were over, the two retreated to a private room, accompanied only by their interpreters.

Then they sat down to talk peace.

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"Gentlemen, the Nation is on Red Alert One," the President said grimly.

He was speaking at an emergency meeting with the Secretary of State, the Director of the CIA, the Secretary of Defense and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

"The Russian premier denies emphatically that Russia has launched anything into orbit during the last week, much less a nuclear bomb. But we know a bomb is up there, even though we can't be sure which nation put it there. And we know it has to be used against us within five days.

"We must find out immediately who is threatening our country, and why! And we must stop them!"